The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research

Volume 17 *The Review* Article 6

"But I must also feel it like a man": Redressing Representations of Masculinity in Macbeth

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Abstract

The most popular characters in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, second only to Macbeth himself, are the Weird Sisters. Despite being called "Sisters" the women are oddly androgynous and there is very little in their physical appearance or behavior to indicate their gender. Even more importantly, there is nothing to indicate their place in the Scottish patriarchy of which Macbeth and Banquo are firmly established. As the first actors to appear on stage and arguably the manipulators of Macbeth's fate, the genderless Weird Sisters would have disturbed deeply rooted understandings of gender definition and hierarchy in viewers. This disturbance allows Shakespeare to redress binary understandings of masculinity through the characters of Macbeth, MacDuff, and King Duncan. By looking at definitions of masculinity and patriarchy in Early Modern England it is becomes evident that Shakespeare is rejecting a narrow definition of what it means to be a "man". He instead embraces a much broader concept of gender which challenges many common masculine stereotypes in favor of a contradictory and complex view of masculinity and patriarchy.

Keywords

Macbeth, Sexuality, Gender, Shakespeare, Witchcraft, Early Modern England

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to the St. John Fisher College English department for always pushing me to write more and to broaden my thinking

"But I must also feel it like a man:" Representations of Masculinity in **Macbeth**

Caitlin Higgins

The most frequently referenced characters in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are the three frightening and androgynous Weird Sisters. Despite being called "Sisters," there is very little in their physical appearance or behavior to reinforce their gender. Even more importantly, there is nothing to indicate their place in the Scottish patriarchy. Beards would have been the most legible source of gender hierarchy for men. As the first actors to appear on stage and arguably the mediators of Macbeth's fate, the bearded Weird Sisters would have disturbed deeply rooted understandings of gender définition and hierarchy in viewers. Bearded women would not have had any place within the male hierarchy and their presence produces a destabilization of gender for both the audience and the characters in *Macbeth.* This disturbance allows Shakespeare to redress binary understandings of masculinity through the characters of Macbeth, King Duncan, and Macduff. By looking at definitions of masculinity and patriarchy in early modern England we can observe that Shakespeare is rejecting a narrow definition of what it means to be a "man." He instead embraces a much broader concept of gender which challenges many common masculine stereotypes in favor of a contradictory and complex view of masculinity and patriarchy.

The physical appearances of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters would have been a notable departure from the three witches in the source Shakespeare drew from. One of several primary sources for *Macbeth* is the legend of King Macbeth recorded by Raphael Holinshed in *The Chronicles of England Scotland, and Ireland.* Completed in 1587, it is a recording of the events leading up to and after the historic Macbeth's usurpation of the Scottish throne. Surprisingly, especially when contrasted with Shakespeare's adaptation, the Weird Sisters have hardly any presence in the Holinshed record. When they initially appear to Macbeth and Banquo, the witches are described only as "three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world" (141). When Banquo meets the witches in *Macbeth*, his first impulse is to situate the women in terms of the gender patriarchy as either men, women, or boys. However, he is extremely confused by their appearance. Banquo declares "you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.46-48). The witches appear to be women and yet have beards which obscures Banquo's ability to accurately judge their gender. Although Banquo wishes to "interpret" the witches to be women, their beards literally "forbid" him to do so. The fate of the men is relayed to them not by their equals but by those who operate outside of gender norms.

The beard was an incredibly important aspect of the construction of masculinity in early modern England. Particularly during the time *Macbeth* was written and showcased, the beard would have been a key visual marker which socially separated men from boys and women. Mark Johnson, in his article "Bearded Women in Early Modern England," describes the beard as not only a marker of gender but also as a sign of economic standing and marriageability. In 16th and 17th century London, the "presence of a beard advertised the completion of apprenticeship and the acquisition of freeman status" (1). A beard indicated that the individual was now a sexually and socioeconomically viable member of society (1). Beardless faces either belonged to children or to women, both of whom would be subordinated by that patriarchal construct.

The importance of the beard in signifying manhood appears a surprising number of times throughout the play. Often, beards are representative of a moment of intense emotion or desperation on behalf of Macbeth. In Act 5, Scene 2, Macbeth is preparing for his final sparring with his rival Macduff. Lennox, a Scottish nobleman, takes stock of the pitiful forces that Macbeth has collected for battle; “There is Siward’s son, / And many unrough youths that even now, / protest their first of manhood” (5.2.9-11). The “unrough youths” are smooth faced young boys and teens. The boys cannot yet “protest their first manhood” because their very manhood is quantifiable only by having a beard. Without beards, these are a collection of individuals who would have been considered ranked with women in the patriarchal constructs of early modern England. Macbeth’s army is composed of boys so young that they would not have been considered socially, sexually, or economically independent outside of wartime. This intensifies the audience’s perception of how desperate, and how hopeless, Macbeth’s cause is at this point in the play. These soldiers are not men but rather the social equivalent of an army of women. At this point in the play, either all of the “men” are dead or, more likely, no true bearded “men” will fight for his ridiculous cause.

A bearded woman challenges the pairing of the beard and maleness in a way which would have been very troubling to Renaissance audiences. The presence of a beard on women outwardly marks them as witches and also signifies that they are social outliers who do not participate in the established patriarchy as subordinate to men. The witches provide no other contextual clues to indicate that they are either women or men. Instead they become an ambiguous “other” with powers which extend outside the authority of the men. The witches are not crossdressing (as is a major plot device in many of his plays) so the witches’ presence as an “other” gender is never readdressed through a gender reveal or a costume change. They become representative of an alternative economy outside of patriarchal prerogative that operates by rules mysterious to those rooted in commonly accepted gender stereotypes. By using the social and political male signifier of the beard to complicate the gender of the witches, Shakespeare is both critiquing binary understandings of gender and embracing a more complex view of masculinity which rejects understanding on the basis of stereotypes. This is most clearly illustrated by the character of Macbeth who struggles through the play to come to his own definition of masculinity and ultimately is undone by it.

Macbeth seems to be the individual most strongly impacted by the witches’ destabilization of gender hierarchy. Macbeth, before meeting the witches, seems self-assured and certain of his place in Scottish society. Macbeth post-weird sisters is erratic, unstable, and anything but certain of his masculinity. It is interesting to note just how many times throughout the play Macbeth seems to go out of his way to define his own sense of masculinity. No other male character in the play makes such an effort to defend the authenticity of their gendered behavior. While other characters may comment on the manliness of their king or another male character, Macbeth is the only one to whom it feels necessary to qualify manhood in direct reference to himself. He seems to be caught in a constant cycle of being unmanned and then needing to reassert his masculinity. One reason why Macbeth may feel the need to continuously restate his masculinity may be because he has become genuinely confused about his own definition of masculinity. It is obvious, at least at the start of the play, that Macbeth is morally aware that to some extent his honor and identity stem from his obedience to King Duncan. When contemplating the possibility of murder, he says, "My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man that function / Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is / But what is not" (1.3.141-144). In "Themes of Manhood in Five Shakespeare Tragedies" C. O. Gardner identifies this as the moment when Macbeth's masculinity "begins to lose its singleness" (15). Up until this moment, Macbeth has defined masculinity as being courageous, noble, and loyal to the authority of his king. His actions, which earned him the title of "Thane of Cawdor," consisted of fighting honorably in wars for his King and respecting his place within the structured Scottish nobility. After meeting the Weird Sisters, Macbeth has been presented with a new definition of masculinity which inherently violates his moral values. He is discovering that rather than being one, single-minded man, there is another aspect of his personality which considers regicide as a means of advancement. Macbeth's understanding of himself, as instigated by the Weird Sisters, is disrupted in an irreparable way from which his sense of self never recovers.

Macbeth's definition of masculinity may be so malleable because it is based on other people's opinions and evaluations of his standing and his actions rather than his own moral compass. Gardner suggests that Macbeth's self-esteem and ambition have been "fed by his own and by society's acknowledgement of his power" (17). I would argue that this also works on his view of what it is to be a man. In several instances, Macbeth seems to change his definition of manhood in reaction to someone challenging his power or authority. In Act 1, Scene 7, Lady Macbeth questions whether her husband would prefer to "live a coward in thine own esteem" rather than kill Duncan and gain the Kingship (1.7.43). She is questioning his masculinity, defined here by his political power, and his very integrity as a man. Macbeth counters her accusation by saying "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.47-48). Macbeth reestablishes his masculinity by essentially stating that whatever he does is what is appropriate for a man to do. The notion of murder which a short time earlier violently disrupted his understanding of his own morality and self-possession is now excusable because Macbeth embodies manhood.

The character of Macbeth embodies crumbling ideals of masculinity in early modern England. His uncertainty and his unwillingness to obey his own sense of morality ultimately lead to his disillusionment and demise. Macbeth seems to represent a warning against allowing one's self-image to be manipulated by societal norms. The ways in which his views of masculinity are constantly shifting and finally settle on violence and ambition, ambitions which lead to his destruction and loss of power, are a testament against a traditional understanding of masculinity which values those things above morality, courage, and sensitivity. Macbeth is not remembered kindly, but those men who embody a more complex sense of masculinity are.

The play offers only a small glimpse of the personality of King Duncan in the time before he is murdered. However, in that time the audience glimpses a man who is secure in his masculinity and embodies a complex understanding of gender which extends beyond ideas of ambition and power. While the King Duncan of the Holinshed source is fumbling and foolish, Shakespeare's adaptation of him is more noble and honorable. Duncan's language is heavily laden with feminine undertones and themes of nurturing. He responds to the return of the warlike

Macbeth by saying “Welcome hither. / I have begun to plant thee, and will labor / To make thee full of growing” (1.4.28-30). In the same scene he requests of Banquo to allow him to “infold thee / And hold thee to my heart” (1.4.30-33). More often than any other character he frequently uses the word “love” to describe his relationship with his close friends and subjects. He embodies a view of masculinity which allows for emotion and sensitivity and rewards loyalty and obedience over warmongering. His behavior and viewpoints present a shocking juxtaposition to Macbeth’s campaign of unfeeling ambition.

The value of Duncan’s complex perspective becomes even more evident after his death in the ways he is described by those who mourn him. Macbeth, the man who committed the deed, describes Duncan’s corpse as “silver skin laced with his golden blood, / And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature” (1.2.91-93). Duncan’s body is described in terms of precious metals and turned into a sacred object of value. His behavior in life has made him sacred in death and, despite the knowledge that he murdered him, even Macbeth chooses to remember him fondly possibly because he embodied a sense of self awareness that Macbeth lacks. Macduff elevates the corpse of Duncan to the status of holy relic when he states “Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord’s anointed temple, and stole thence / The life o' th' building!” (1.3.41-43). Duncan embodies the spirit of God, rather than mortal man and becomes the ideal embodiment of a servant of God on earth. By remembering Duncan in this way as both sacred object and sacred spirit, Shakespeare encourages approval of Duncan’s behavior and masculinity in a way which Macbeth never receives in life or in death.

Duncan’s complex embodiment of masculinity is expanded upon by the character of Macduff, Macbeth’s rival and the man who is determined to restore Scotland to glory. While Macduff is more warlike than Duncan (he ultimately claims Macbeth’s head) his reasons for doing so are based in maintaining order in Scotland and protecting the innocent. Macduff, like Duncan, stands as a complete juxtaposition to the character of Macbeth. Throughout the play he embodies a sense of disgust towards the actions of Macbeth in a way which refuses to change his sense masculinity in response to war. In his call to action for his troops he says “Hold fast the mortal sword and, like good men, / Bestride our downfall’n birthdom Each new morn / New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds” (4.3.3-7). He wages war against Macbeth not for personal gain but to defend those who cannot defend themselves. His view of masculinity and patriarchy is firmly established in protecting the family over personal elevation. After learning of the death of his family, Malcolm pleads with Macduff to take revenge and to “dispute it like a man” (meaning to respond with violence); Macduff responds by saying “I shall do so, / But I must also feel it as a man. / I cannot but remember such things were / That were most precious to me” (4.3.226-229). The phrase “feel it as a man” implies that masculinity also includes acknowledging loss and mourning as valuable traits. Macduff acts upon ideas of order and patriarchy but does so in a way which allows for logic and sensitivity to intermingle with duty and order.

It is no coincidence that the unfeeling, alpha-male Macbeth is finally destroyed by the sensitive, family orientated Macduff in an event that was set in motion by the Witches. The bearded weird sisters which disrupt the audience's understanding of patriarchy set the stage for Macbeth’s struggle with his own sense of self. The fall of Macbeth due to an oversimplification of masculinity and an emphasis on ambition and violence highlights the traits of kindness and justice displayed through both Duncan and Macduff. By dismantling Macbeth (by way of the weird sisters) and promoting King Duncan and Macduff, Shakespeare encourages a kind of masculinity that is complex and more reliant on order, sensitivity, expression of emotion, and mutual respect over ambition and violence. While it does not completely reject the merits of traditional masculinity, it is a suggestion that what it is to be a male is more complex that gender stereotyping may lead Englishmen to believe.

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