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The Problem of Gender in *Macbeth*

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ABSTRACT

Among the many phenomena of human life that preoccupied Shakespeare, one was the problem of gender. Shakespeare undoubtedly advanced beyond his era in recognising the diversity of gender and its associated experiences. His characters often indulged in what has been called "transvestite games." Scholarship has revealed that these games could also be, at times, used to see how a man could have erotic feelings for the character dressed as his gender or one of the opposite sex. In his comedies, particularly in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night,* and *The Merchant of Venice* (and there are some others too), he seems to initiate debates on how people fall in love in untraditional ways. In *As You Like It* (1599) and *Twelfth Night (1601-02)*, Orlando and Duke Orsino seem to have been drawn towards Rosalind and Viola, respectively, in their male avatars. Falling in love with them then becomes easy because they have already developed soft corners for these women dressed in men's attire. In *Twelfth Night*, Olivia can love Sebastian (as no other) only because she has fallen in love with Viola dressed as a young male, and Sebastian is her twin. From the above instances, it is not difficult to see that Shakespeare's mind was busy experimenting with transgender experiences before he wrote *Macbeth* (1606). Shakespeare appears to be grappling with profound differences regarding the traditional understanding of human nature, as well as the nature of woman understood similarly. This paper is mainly about the ambivalent status of the male and female genders in Shakespeare's mind when he wrote *Macbeth*.

Keywords: *gender, Shakespeare, Macbeth, erotic, sex*

FULL PAPER

Introduction

This article has been developed on the idea that *Macbeth*, the play, is about the nature of manhood, given in one of the lectures by the novelist Professor Lakshmi Raj Sharma. During the play, Macbeth's mind, as well as that of Lady Macbeth, swings between two poles in their understanding of the nature of man. We are made aware of a relatively recent theory of gender, as Shakespeare had anticipated it. He sees a difference between human males and females on the one hand and men and women on the other. The human male and female are biological conceptions. The meanings of "man" and "woman" are socially constructed. *Macbeth* can be considered Shakespeare's treatise on what a man is and also what a woman is. Throughout the play, there are too many references to this gendered experience. There is a continuous evolution in each gender towards the other. Shakespeare was to do something similar with specific variations in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607). From the year 1606-07, when he wrote *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, it seems he was thinking seriously about the nature of gender and what society can make of it. He seems to have concluded both these plays that men and women are not binary opposites of each other. They continuously borrow each other's gender traits as individuals, whereas society tries to keep them apart according to the meaning it gives to the two genders.

In *Macbeth*, the witches decide to meet Macbeth in the very first scene because they seem to desire revenge against that man who is generally considered the most manly. They decide to turn his life upside down so that for a large part of the play, his manliness vanishes and he begins to easily fear little things that earlier he would never be afraid of. The fact that they want to meet him alone and not any other man in Scotland makes him a prized catch for them. The best image that describes his manliness is "Bellona's bridegroom" (Act I, Scene ii, 62). He is also portrayed as a "peerless kinsman" (Act I, Scene iv, 65), "Valor's minion" (Act I, Scene ii, 21), "brave Macbeth" (Act I, Scene ii, 18), and "valiant cousin" (Act I, Scene ii, 26). In the initial part of the play, Shakespeare makes an effort to construct a portrait of Macbeth, making him a man in the socially conceived perception. It is from here that Macbeth's gender will begin to become somewhat womanly. Later, in another play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony, "a triple pillar of the world," will be a less manly figure. He will lay his sword, Philippan, down, which is symbolic of his manliness, as Agrippa informs, "She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed" (Act II, Scene ii, 266). He will become even weaker when Hercules, his god, leaves him in Act IV. Both these men become, in some sense, effeminate. In the two years between which these two plays were written, Shakespeare seems to be thinking about gender and sexuality in serious terms. Though nothing can be said with any sense of finality on this issue, conjectures can be made. Shakespeare provides us with sufficient metaphors and images, along with a content-oriented plot, for these conjectures to be made. There are good

reasons for Shakespeare to have thought about gender issues and included them in his plays and sonnets, given that he could not have been in an ideal marital state, having left his wife in Stratford-on-Avon for such a long period and staying in London. According to Stephen Greenblatt, "it is, perhaps, as much what Shakespeare did *not* write as what he did that seems to indicate something seriously wrong with his marriage. . . . Shakespeare was curiously restrained in his depictions of what it is actually like to be married" (pp. 126-127). It is common knowledge that Shakespeare had a homosexual imagination. Some recent studies, particularly on his sonnets, have suggested that he had a preference for men, as claimed by Franssen, as he indeed seems to have had for the Earl of Southampton. Exploring the possibility of homosexual leanings in Shakespeare, René Weis observes:

> Perhaps no relationship in his life left as deep a mark on Shakespeare as the one with Southampton. At its most innocuous, their friendship was one of homage and patronage, at its most daring a full-blown homoerotic affair . . . (156)

His mind seems to have moved from marriage to other avenues in which he was discovering experimental joys in different sexualities. With the kind of imagination Shakespeare possesses, it seems very probable that he wandered between various genders, trying to construct a picture of what man exactly is and, complementary to this, what woman is. In both the plays—*Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*— there is a woman dominating over a man and spoiling things for him in the man's world, where he has to prove himself all the time. Both the women, Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra, have compelled their men to think like them and do as they want. Shakespeare could have observed that men's power diminishes when they have women waiting upon them in the home. His concern in these plays was most probably to decide how much disempowerment in the male gender would still allow his heroes to be called men. This paper also examines the concept of man and the reduction of his masculinity in the context of Macbeth.

It is not without an awareness of Shakespeare's central design in this play that Shakespeare makes Macbeth and the murderers discourse on the difference between men and dogs of various categories. The murderers are the men of the lowest category because they are prisoners with the least amount of empowerment that a man can possess. They have been "bowed" to "the grave," and their families have been "beggared" forever (Act III, Scene i, 100-101). Macbeth makes the murderers conscious that they are in such a miserable predicament. In reply to this, the first murderer comments, "We are men, my liege" (Act III, Scene i, 102). This statement contains much dramatic irony because the play has already raised the debate about what a man is. Through the lines spoken by the first murderer, we are being made to see that the male gender, often considered the empowered one, has touched rock bottom in this case. Macbeth, therefore, retorts by saying:

> Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men,

As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,
Shoughs, water-rugs and demi-wolves are clept
All by the name of dogs. (Act III, Scene i, 103-107)

From this, one can see even within the human male gender, as in the species of dog, there is a possibility of a considerable amount of variation. What Shakespeare seems to be pointing out is that calling someone a man will always be a misnomer because a man can mean several things. This is an awareness of Shakespeare's unique perception of the fact that the word man is not of constant value but, rather, a fluid entity that is difficult to define.

The fact that in society we feel reasonably sure and assured that we know what we are talking about when we call someone a man means we believe he has understood what we mean. Someone registered in municipal records as a man will merely be a biological man. But even the term biological man can be deconstructed into a perpetually postponed meaning. Shakespeare's mind seems highly conscious of the fact that when we call someone a man or woman, we hardly express ourselves in intelligible terms.

Lady Macbeth seems to have understood that she is a woman with womanly qualities, of which pity is the main one, but which is accompanied by others, like being able to love a babe that milks her. She thinks she knows that to get Duncan murdered in her castle, it is necessary to unsex herself, so she makes this appeal:

Come, you spirits
That tends to mortal thoughts, unsex me here. (Act I, Scene v, 47-48)

From this belief of Lady Macbeth, it would seem that a man can kill more easily than a woman can. According to this logic, a man has less pity than a woman, and Lady Macbeth needs to change her gender to do wrong acts. She is a woman who has taught herself to believe that men, particularly those chosen by women, are the ones who do wrong. She could indeed have been a chairperson addressing a body of people on the feminine nature. A man is needed to do the dirty work, while a woman would have to go through a sex change to do the same. We do not know whether the spirits she invites to come to her woman's breast and take her milk for gall ever come to do that. There is no indication in the text that they do. Yet, she imagines she has happily and successfully achieved a sex change just by uttering those words. Shakespeare, aptly, considers milk to be the sole possession of a woman and therefore a symbol of womanliness. Lady Macbeth has decided to give up her milk and replace it with gall, and gall in her imagination is the proud possession of males. But very soon she makes a statement about Macbeth, claiming that he is "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" (Act I, Scene v, 17). It is difficult to say why a woman who thinks that a change in gender and the drying up of milk are vital to doing what men do easily, without needing a sex change. Yet, after all her discourse on the gendered reality of women and its transformation into murderous possibilities in men, she still holds that Macbeth lacks that determination and is probably not enough of a man. Even though recognised

by others as the bravest in Scotland, she, who in Bradley's terms is a perfect wife, sees a womanly quality in Macbeth. It may, therefore, be said that before murdering Duncan, Macbeth has a remarkable flexibility in his character. To his wife, he is "too full of the milk of human kindness," and to the outside world, he is the bravest and most valiant man. The wife can see the inner reality of a husband, which the outside world cannot see. The net result of all this is, however, that the gendered reality becomes a riddle. A man can be one way outside, but the opposite at home. The meaning of manhood is muddled in the world of this play. There are multiple dialogues about Macbeth's manhood:

> When you durst do it, then you were a man;
> And to be more than what you were, you would
> Be so much more of a man. (Act I, Scene vii, 56-58)

Lady Macbeth goes on asking Macbeth whether he is a man at all. She asks, "Are you a man?" (Act III, Scene iv, 70) and "What, quite unmanned in folly? (Act III, Scene iv, 88). At the end of so much questioning about the nature of Macbeth's manhood, one begins to wonder whether he could even help in procreation.

L. C. Knights has written a notorious essay, "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" in which he raises the issue of whether or not the Macbeths had children. Macduff confirms the information about Macbeth and says that "He has no children" (Act IV, Scene iii, 255). Jang's study connects Macbeth's childlessness to his guilt and conscience (96). But Macbeth was probably incapable of producing children, and Lady Macbeth's reference to giving suck to a babe could be a reference to someone else's baby. Macbeth is disturbed by the fact that his progeny will not inherit his throne. He complains, "Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown/ And put a barren sceptre in my grip (Act III, Scene i, 66-67). As his perfect wife, she probably knew that he could never help her produce a child. It could be for this reason that she continues to ask him whether he is a man. Shakespeare sees two kinds of manhood in operation, which he often presents in his plays: one is the manhood in public places, and the other is the manhood at home.

Macbeth could be a psychological case of a man who displayed extraordinary manly prowess on the battlefield because he was uncertain of whether he was capable of procreation. When he tells his wife, "Bring forth men-children only" (Act I, Scene vii, 83), he may have been trying to make her somehow believe that he was still capable of helping her produce children.

In the world of *Macbeth,* manhood is linked with certain socially acceptable traits. For instance, a man to be respected in court possesses honour, courage, and loyalty. These are Macbeth's main manly virtues, and therefore, he is very high in King Duncan's esteem. Such a man should also show transparency and no ambiguity when presenting himself before the king and his courtiers. This could be the required manhood in the public world, in which Macbeth has proved himself very high. However, once at home, things can get reversed in the life of such a man who has a wife like Lady Macbeth,

who continuously tries to indoctrinate him on the nature of manhood. In her scheme of things, the real man is not honourable, brave, and loyal, but the one who *seems* to possess these qualities. Her philosophy is that one should be a flower on top and a serpent underneath; she teaches Macbeth to, "Look like th' innocent flower,/ But be the serpent under 't." (Act I, Scene v, 76-77). If Macbeth can act like that, he will be a man in the truest sense, according to Lady Macbeth. It is not as if she is entirely wrong in assessing him because he has been a flower on top and a serpent underneath when he has promised his wife to do certain deeds, which he decides not to do when the king arrives as his guest. What Macbeth's role in this play suggests is the difference between Macbeth's appearance and reality. In the public world, he is a proper man in the public sense; at home, he has been a proper man in the domestic sense, which could mean in the domesticated sense, where he is to act by his wife's desires. Macbeth is turning out successful both outside and at home until he finally decides to kill Duncan. The problem arises when he decides to carry out his plans both as a public figure and as an obedient husband. In *Macbeth* and *Othello*, the biggest test of a married man is to be himself in and outside the home— to be a man in both domains. Both Macbeth and Othello fail the test (one wonders whether Shakespeare failed it too in his own life and therefore remained in the public domain, only giving up domestic plain for most of his married life). Shakespeare seems to have thought that a man who begins to get shaky on the domestic front begins to become more and more of a psychological case. Macbeth, in trying to do what his wife wants, becomes a mental wreck and has hallucinations. Similarly, when Othello begins to imagine that Desdemona is rejecting him as a man in favour of another, he too becomes intensely passionate. He has a fit of anger in which he faints. From these plays, it emerges that the real man in Shakespeare's world can enact different roles in different situations and never let either his public or his private self out in the other two domains. Both Macbeth and Othello fail to treat their women as though they were no more than individuals who had to be kept away from their innermost selves—Shakespeare's claim in *As You Like It* that all the world's a stage is apt. A man should be an actor in public as well as at home. Showing their true selves to their wives is the biggest trap into which the two heroes fall.

Even though A. C. Bradley has considered Macbeth's tragic flaw to be an "overvaulting ambition" (294). This is so because Macbeth himself has made this statement; he has not recognised himself properly. The fact is that it is Lady Macbeth who is overambitious; she incites Macbeth to do what is unnatural for him. She tells him that he neither loves her nor is brave enough to do the deed. And thus, he tells him that he is like "the poor cat i' th' adage" (Act I, Scene vii, 49) who wanted to eat fish but did not want to wet its paws. Come to think of it, most men would be like the poor cat in the adage. They would accept something that comes to them easily, even if it involves some immorality. Macbeth is not the only one to want to be king if kingship comes without any inconvenience to him. His wanting to be a king should not be

taken as proof of his overvaulting ambition. The tragedy of the play is probably more because of Lady Macbeth, who has the "golden round" (Act I, Scene v, 31) in her imagination. Most people aim to reach the highest position possible without engaging in unethical behaviour. Macbeth has clearly said that he is not prepared to murder Duncan (Act I, Scene vii, 1-28). Macbeth's failure lies in his inability to act convincingly in front of his wife. After Lady Macbeth's death, when he introspects about himself vis-à-vis life in general terms, he refers to life as:

> . . . a walking shadow, poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then it is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, complete of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (Act V, Scene v, 27-31)

Macbeth has enacted his role very well, and he is not a poor player publicly until he has taken the final decision to murder Duncan. The question then arises, why is his life a reflection of a poor player? The reason is that he has not succeeded in playing that role in front of his wife, as he did publicly and in front of the king.

Critics have seen various themes in this play, such as the theme of evil and the overall pattern of the difference between appearance and reality, guilt, fate, overreaching ambition, etc. But the chief thematic pattern in this play is to reflect upon the nature of man and manhood, and to a lesser extent the nature of woman and womanhood, and to a further lesser extent a character such as Banquo has been skillfully placed into the play's dramatic structure in a way to reflect upon the kind of man Macbeth is, or what men generally are. Duncan and others regard both Macbeth and Banquo as the best and most respectable men in Scotland. They are the best men because they are the best soldiers or generals, both of which are manly qualities according to the norms of that age. Banquo can be called a shadow of Macbeth or a lesser Macbeth. He is as interested in knowing about his future and looking into the seeds of time, almost as Macbeth is. He is also a public man in the sense that before the king and his men, he will never give out his true self. He never tells anyone about their meetings with the witches. Telling would mean what they have predicted, and their predictions make Banquo's children kings. It would be politically and strategically wrong to let people know about how Banquo's children can pose a threat to Duncan's sons and their offspring. Both Macbeth and Banquo are Machiavellian in spirit. It is for this reason that they both distrust each other even as they act as though they don't. Macbeth says of Banquo, "... under him/ My genius is rebuked, as it is said/ Mark Antony's was by Caesar" (Act III, Scene i, 60-63). Both these men are not only flowers on top in public; they are also fairly honourable men. It is debatable whether there are any intrinsically honourable men in society. To Shakespeare, at least, it seems that there are not because he believes that "all the world's a stage" (*As You Like It*, Act II, Scene vii, 139). Most of us are acting when we seem to be good citizens. Thomas Hobbes could have learnt a lesson or two from

Shakespeare when he constructed his theory on human nature, which posits that human nature is driven by desire. In the absence of state forces, everybody is an enemy of everybody. He notes that life is under a constant war in which human life is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (65). From what we see of Banquo, it seems quite evident that a man, or a "gentleman" to use a social term, is one who can enact the role of being good publicly. Duncan has come to this conclusion when he comments on the Thane of Cawdor:

> There's no art
> To find the mind's construction in the face.
> He was a gentleman on whom I built
> An absolute trust. (Act 1, Scene iv, 13-16)

Macbeth repeats the history of the Thane of Cawdor after becoming the Thane of Cawdor, and the Thane of Cawdor once again deceives Duncan because of Macbeth's good presentation of himself in public.

We might return to the fact that, ultimately, there are no fixed standards that provide the proper criteria by which to judge whether someone is a man with enough of what is called manhood in him. Much depends on how well he can enact the role of being a man. In any case, it is vitally important to remember what Shakespeare said in *Hamlet*, "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (Act II, Scene ii, 239-240).

At the beginning of the play, there is a visible indication that manhood is directly proportional to manly strength and soldierly prowess. One reason Duncan needs Macbeth and Banquo is that they are significantly younger than he, skilled soldiers, and physically much stronger. However, the weaker Duncan once murdered seems to be much stronger than Macbeth: "After life's fitful fever he sleeps well./ Treason has done his worst; nor steel nor poison,/Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing/ can touch him further." (Act III, Scene ii, 26-29) and Lady Macbeth says for him, ". . . who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (Act V, Scene i, 41-42). All this could suggest that life is mysterious and far too complex to be understood intellectually. One who seems weak can be stronger at some level than those generally considered brave and strong.

The question then arises: who is a man, or what does the universe of *Macbeth* project as an authentic replica of manhood? The answer to these questions is the thesis of this paper. The real, as opposed to the virtual, man is the one whose existence is based on a moral being. This morality is not based solely on what is socially good or bad, but rather on an inner strength that prevents a person from going against their conscience. Lady Macbeth is shown as a woman without a conscience; Macbeth is a man who goes against his conscience, as Banquo also does. Macduff, on the other hand, acts according to his conscience. The witches have predicted that there is one man, not born of woman, who can kill Macbeth; no other can. This man is Macduff, who was from his mother's womb "untimely ripped" (Act V, Scene VIII, 20). It is this man who kills the one who went against his conscience. Hence, he has a very central

role to play in the structure of a play that deals with the true nature of manhood. He kills Macbeth and thereby symbolically kills whatever is wrong with the health of Scotland.

The most genuine part of A. C. Bradley's theory of Shakespearean tragedy is that it is about the downfall of man. In other words, a Shakespearean tragedy shows us the rise and fall, not of a woman, but of a man. Therefore, whatever is done by women is given secondary significance in the play's scheme. Bradley seems quite mistaken when he calls Lady Macbeth a "perfect wife" because a perfect wife should understand how a husband would take on the role of one forced into murdering. Her lust for the "golden round" makes her blind to how her husband would not fit into the role of a murderer and would undo himself pathetically. If Lady Macbeth has collapsed under the pressure of trying to act like a man, that does not seem a good enough reason for labelling her a perfect wife. She has acted little better than the witches in this play. If she is upset when she sees her husband disintegrating due to his guilt, she should not be considered anything like a "fiend-like queen" (Act V, Scene VIII, 82). Bradley stands on flimsy premises when he promotes her to a perfect wife for having gotten her husband to murder the king and then pitying him for falling to pieces. She is not the ideal woman in the play; she is a contrast to what a woman ought to be. It may not seem entirely right to consider her a fourth witch in exact terms in a world where feminism has taught us to think better. Though a feminist reading of *Macbeth* by Neely has, like Bradley, seen this play as the tragedy of the witches, who "are indirectly identified... by their departures from prescribed female subordination, by their parallel role as catalysts to Macbeth's actions, and by the structure and symbolism of the play" (57). The play can indeed be looked upon, as Chakrabarti and Sarkar have suggested, as having witches at its centre. Three women who have been forced into the margins of society by scheming men have now gotten together to teach Man a lesson. It is their revenge on the most aspiring and advantageously placed man in society. Having suffered some exploitation in the early part of their lives, these three women have ultimately succeeded in telling the world what happens to a man who does not act within his limits. Lady Macbeth also does not act within her limits and therefore proceeds towards a dusty death like her husband. Neither of the Macbeths seems to allow their conscience to guide them, and are thus not what a man or a woman should be. Physical strength, courage, and skill in the workplace are not enough to make anyone an ideal man or woman. A tragedy typically depicts a protagonist's downfall despite good intentions. Neither Macbeth nor his wife falls in that category in precise terms.

Lady Macduff is a better claimant for the term perfect wife because she dies for her husband and her children in trying to save them. In the contemporary world, however, Lady Macduff may not be considered empowered enough to be termed a perfect wife, and she is at best a minor character in the play. Yet, the single scene in which she appears grips the audience emotionally as no other scene does. She begins by saying that her

husband is a traitor to her because he has run away, leaving his family in danger. However, when a murderer appears and asks where Macduff is, she says, "I hope in no place so unsanctified/ Where such as thou mayst find him" (Act IV, Scene ii, 90-91).

A perfect wife is one with whom a man manages to achieve the best that is possible for him. Macduff can persuade Malcolm to return to Scotland and fight against the tyranny of Macbeth. He also fights and kills Macbeth. He may have lost his wife and children, but he has the goodwill of a nation. Both MacDuff and his wife have acted by their conscience.

One reason that makes Macduff a superior man is that he has made an enormous sacrifice. He has left behind a loving and good wife and all his children, even though the tyrant can kill them. For him, the nation is more important than his family. He has not gone away to England to escape Macbeth's wrath and cruelty towards him. He has gone there to persuade Malcolm to return to Scotland and save a country that is plagued by the rule of a tyrant. He is Macbeth's opposite because he does not act as his wife may have wanted him to in the crisis. He is brave enough to work for his nation even if that means the end of his private happiness. Just as General Siward is proud of his son for dying as one who fights for his country, Siward goes on to declare, "Had I as many sons as I have hairs,/would not wish them to a fairer death" (Act V, Scene viii, 56-57). Similarly, Macduff has also sacrificed his entire family in the interest of his country. Had he taken his wife and children along with him to England, he may have been caught on the way and failed to save his country from Macbeth. *Macbeth* is a play that portrays a man who transcends his selfish interests in the face of his conscience.

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