Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione Culturale (LTLLM)
Classe LT-11

Tesina di Laurea

Female Hysteria and Patriarchal Dominance: A Study of Lady Macbeth

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Anno Accademico 2022 / 2023

To Professor Antonio Santercole, my mentor

To my grandpa, Mario, the brightest star

I hope you are proud of me

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FOREWORD

In the first chapter, I focus my attention on the historical background that most likely influenced William Shakespeare's composition of *The Tragedy of Macbeth* in the years between 1603 and 1606. Particular attention is given to the role of women in early modern society. The primary societal function women had to fulfil was that of caretakers, child-bearers, and housekeepers. However, women were oftentimes open to suspicions of witchcraft because the domestic space was associated with feminine energy and authority. Besides wives and daughters, women could also be deemed witches and hysterics. According to the humoral theory developed by Hippocrates and Galen, while men were hot and dry, women were cold and moist. As the weaker sex, women were physiologically more prone to disease and demonic possession than men. In this section, I elaborate on this theory by discussing contemporary medical theories, with the most renowned being the one formulated by the physician Edward Jorden.

Then, I briefly introduce the play by mentioning the various sources Shakespeare may or may not have considered. His main source is, without doubt, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, a collaborative work about the histories of England, Scotland, and Ireland, first published in 1577. Shakespeare may have taken inspiration from Holinshed and other chroniclers of the time, yet he expanded his characters and created other identities. I have analysed some core scenes, namely the first scene of Act 1, which sets the tone for the overall narrative.

In the second chapter, my analysis focuses on the different types of masculinity the audience can encounter in *Macbeth*. First and foremost, the protagonist of the play appears to initially embody a rather ambitious and toxic masculinity that is then

challenged throughout the play. Borrowing from Kenneth Muir, Macbeth is a "noble and gifted man who falls into treachery and crime, not deluded into believing that he has any justification for his deeds, but knowing them precisely for what they are". [1] Macbeth's ambition is fuelled by the witches' prophecies and by his wife, who repeatedly goads him into embodying an ideal of masculinity he does not subscribe to and that we as an audience are led to interrogate. David Barron claims that Macbeth's "sense of masculinity is shattered by Banquo's mysterious rise".[2] Banquo embodies a positive conception of masculinity by refusing to allow the prophecies to manipulate his thoughts and drive him towards committing immoral actions. Nevertheless, Banquo and his son, Fleance, stand as the final two impediments that must be eliminated to ensure the longevity and success of Macbeth's rule. Macduff stands out as the sole character whose masculinity is fully realized, characterized by his unwavering loyalty and honourable nature, coupled with his willingness to express his emotions openly – something his cousin Ross, for example, refuses to do as it would not be proper for a man. Driven by a deep concern for the welfare of his homeland, the Thane of Fife travels to England to meet Malcolm. Malcolm is, despite his young age, quite responsible and wise enough to trick Macduff in order to understand whether he was genuinely interested in restoring Scotland's old glory or if this was orchestrated by the tyrant himself.

In the third chapter, attention is directed towards exploring the various forms of femininity embodied by the female characters within the play. The examinations of the Weïrd Sisters and Lady Macbeth are of particular interest as they exhibit certain similarities in their portrayal as witches. Although Lady Macbeth is not presented as a witch in the play, many scholars argue that her power as a female temptress reveals that

[1] Kenneth Muir, "Introduction", in William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare, London: Methuen, 1964, p.xlix.
[2] David B. Barron, "The Babe That Milks: An Organic Study of Macbeth", *American Imago*, 17, 2 (1960), p.140.

she has much in common with witches. Moreover, Lady Macbeth practices a sort of domestic witchcraft as she summons spirits to deprive her of her femininity and maternity. A brief introduction is provided for the character of Hecate, the ancient goddess of witchcraft and the underworld. It is worth noting that some scholars question the authenticity of scenes featuring Hecate, suggesting they may not have been written by William Shakespeare. The discussion then shifts to Lady Macduff, the wife of the Thane of Fife. While she may be considered a minor character in the play, her character serves as a stark contrast to the strong and assertive Lady Macbeth. Lady Macduff represents a nurturing ideal of femininity as she is deeply concerned with her children's well-being after Macduff's departure. Much like her counterpart, Lady Macduff questions her husband's manhood: she wonders whether a real man is someone who has his country's best interest at heart or that of his children. In the second subchapter, I delve deeper into Lady Macbeth's character by analysing her from the beginning of the play until the end. Based on the eleventh-century Scottish Queen Gruoch, Lady Macbeth passes from a ruthless, manipulative woman to a ghost-like creature who attempts to wash blood from her hands. I would argue that the main factors leading to Lady Macbeth's descent into madness are the overwhelming burden of guilt she carries, her transformation from Macbeth's closest confidante into a mere wife, her impossibility to produce an heir to perpetuate Macbeth's lineage, and I provide a possible cause for this incapacity. I can say with a degree of certainty that these causes led Lady Macbeth to her fits of hysterical somnambulism and, eventually, to her death. While some scholars have posited the possibility of suicide, the play itself does not provide any concrete evidence to substantiate such conjectures. However, in the conclusion of my third chapter I posited three arguments regarding Lady Macbeth's death and three possible explanations for Macbeth's cold and detached answer at the news of his wife's demise.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Women and the occult: witchcraft in early modern England

The role of women has always been contested, both in the Elizabethan and the Jacobean era. Both societies were extremely patriarchal, deeming women as the weaker sex in terms of physical strength and of rationality. The last sovereign of the House of Tudor was Elizabeth I, who reigned from 1558 until her death in 1603. According to John Knox,[1] "the imbecility of their sex rendered women unfit to rule"[2] – a female monarch was an unnatural monstrosity. Deemed unfit to rule, Elizabeth I often met with unsolicited male advice and unvaried pressures to marry: having the support of a male consort was crucial especially for securing a male succession to the throne. Marriage was seen as the desirable state for both men and women, and women who did not wish to marry were looked upon with suspicion. Unlike men whose domain existed in the public sphere and were expected to be the breadwinners, women were raised into narrow roles.[3] As married women, they were expected to tend to the household and its economy, yet they were oftentimes open to suspicions of sorcery as the domestic space was traditionally associated with feminine energy and authority. Hence, this subchapter explores women's position in society as wives and mothers, and also as disorderly people – witches and hysterics.

[1] John Knox (c.1514-1572) was a Scottish reformer, author of *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, through which he attacked female ruling arguing that it was against the Scriptures.
[2] Knox, quoted in Patrick Collinson, "Elizabeth I (1533–1603), queen of England and Ireland", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p.13.
[3] Stephanie Irene Spoto, "Jacobean Witchcraft and Feminine Power", *Pacific Coast Philology*, 45 (2010), p.67.

Throughout the Elizabethan era there was a new awareness regarding women and their position in society. Nevertheless, the standard of the proper woman as one of chastity, silence, and obedience remained. As Suzanne W. Hull points out, men preoccupied themselves with making sure that women understood the "subservient role of the female sex".[4] According to contemporary wisdom, the woman was made for the man; thus, any adult unmarried woman was considered an anomaly. Early modern society viewed women as imperfect versions of men, yet their purpose was to bear as many children as the Lord would grant them, praying that they would be able to raise them to maturity. Sadly, it was common for children to die at a very young age, namely under a year old, being very prone to diseases. As Anthony Fletcher explains, "when a child's survival was short-lived or marked by persistent ill health, parents could accept the loss of one who had not yet taken a deep place in their hearts".[5] Conversely, they were "broken in spirit when they lost older children, who might have yielded them comfort in old age".[6]

King James VI of Scotland and I of England, the successor of Queen Elizabeth I, wrote his *Daemonologie* in 1597, a philosophical dissertation "in Forme of a Dialogue" on necromancy and the practice of witch-hunting where he argued against Reginald Scot's[7] *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584).[8] Scot's treatise consistently attacked belief in witchcraft, stressing how irrational and anti-Christian the persecution of aged and poor women was. Written when still in Scotland, James I ordered the reprinting of *Daemonologie* in London in 1603 as well as the strengthening of the law against witchcraft already passed in the reign of Elizabeth I.[9] In 1562 the Act Against

[4] Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient. English Books for Women, 1475-1640*, San Marino: Huntington Library, 1982, p.6.
[5] Anthony Fletcher, *Growing Up in England: The Experience of Childhood 1600-1914*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p.91.
[6] Ralph Houldbrooke quoted in Fletcher, p.86.
[7] Reginald Scot (c.1538-1599) was an Englishman who, in his treatise entitled *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, argued that there was no witchcraft in contemporary England and that the so-called "witches" had been executed in vain.
[8] Brooke, p.78.
[9] Brooke, pp.78-9.

Conjurations, Enchantments and Witchcraft was passed, which distinguished between first and second offence. In 1586 the Irish Witchcraft Act was passed and it was largely identical to the 1562 one. The punishment for a first offence penalty was "one year's imprisonment, and pillory [six] hours once a quarter", whereas for a second offence penalty the convict "shall suffer death as a felon, and shall lose the priviledge of clergie and sanctuarie".[10] The 1562 act was later repealed by James' Witchcraft Act of 1604, which kept the Elizabethan distinction between first and second offence while focusing on "the demonic and evil nature of witchcraft".[11] James I fervently embraced the correlation between women and witchcraft because, as the weaker sex, it was easier for women "to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Deuill […], which makes him the homelier with that sexe sensine".[12]

The female body was usually explained through the humoral theory, a system of medicine adopted by Ancient Greek and Roman physicians. It was first developed into a medical theory by Hippocrates and later by Galen. The human body is supposedly made of and governed by four humours: while men are hot and dry, women are cold and moist. According to this theory, men were considered choleric and women phlegmatic. Italian scholar Massimo Rinaldi brilliantly translates a passage of Alessandro Piccolomini's *Oratione in lode alle donne*,[13] which explains that "due to the cold nature that makes [women] less tumultuous, quieter, and subtler in their spirits […], women have a well harmonized temper".[14] Here lies the "physiological cause of their inferiority", hence the widespread belief that women were physiologically more prone to diseases and demonic

[10] "1586: 28 Elizabeth 1 c. 2: An Act against Witchcraft and Sorcerie", https://statutes.org.uk/site/the-statutes/irish-laws/1586-28-elizabth-1-c-2-witchcraft/, accessed 31 July 2023.
[11] Nicole Hartland, "Which Witch(craft Act) is Which?", https://archives.blog.parliament.uk/2020/10/28/which-witchcraft-act-is-which/, accessed 31 July 2023.
[12] King James I, quoted in Spoto, p.54.
[13] Published in 1545, in his work Alessandro Piccolomini criticises his fellow male intellectuals for their inadequate treatment of women while he simultaneously establishes himself as women's staunchest defender.
[14] Massimo Rinaldi, "Becoming a Good Wife. Nature and Habits in Paduan Medical Culture in the Age of Shakespeare", *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, forthcoming.

possessions than men. Scholars considered the female body as a highly significant subject, and they discussed aspects like the "woman's otherness, weakness, inferiority, and passivity".[15] Nevertheless, contemporary physician Edward Jorden, author of a treatise entitled *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (1603), advised "men to be very circumspect in pronouncing of a possession" since "the effects of naturall diseases be strange to such as haue not looked thoroughly into them". He reckoned men ready to "drawe forth their wooden dagger, if they do but see a maid or woman suffering one of these fits of the Mother […] as if they were possessed with euil Spirits".[16]

While the majority of women adhered to the expected norms, there existed a notable group of women who defied patriarchal conventions and were deemed disorderly. These women could be classified into three categories: the scold, the whore, and the witch. The earliest use of the noun "scold", as reported from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to a woman of "ribald speech" who "disturb[ed] the peace of the neighbourhood".[17] As a punishment, they would wear a scold's bridle, which is an iron framework that enclosed both their head and tongue. The "whore" was a woman of unbridled sexuality, who had "lost all womanly qualities, such as modesty, fidelity and love, and was capable of all kinds of villainy".[18] Finally, the witch was "a mirror reversal of all that the patriarchy deemed good in a woman".[19] Drawing on the ideas of Reginald Scot as presented in his treatise, these women were so feared by all their neighbours that, if offended, they could do "such things as are beyond the abilities of humane nature".[20]

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[15] Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England. 1550-1720*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.18.
[16] Edward Jorden, "The Epistle Dedicatorie" in *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother*, London: Printed by Iohn Windet, 1603.
[17] "'common scold' in scold, n., sense 1.b", *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8015787905, accessed 31 July 2023.
[18] Mendelson and Crawford, p.71.
[19] Mendelson and Crawford, p.69.
[20] Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, London: Printed by Richard Cotes, 1651, pp.5-6.

Indeed, if their neighbours died or if their children were sick with diseases such as "apoplexies, epilepsies, convulsions, hot fevers, wormes, &c",[21] the community would ignorantly suppose that it was the vengeance of witches.

Besides being deemed witches, women could be further distinguished into bewitched or hysterics. While the witch had been seduced by the Devil and had then formed a voluntary demonic pact with it, the bewitched had simply been deprived of her own will. Witches were found mainly among unmarried women or widowers, who in the collective imaginary were characterized by carnal lust which made them insatiable, whereas bewitchment generally happened to teenagers.[22] Finally, the hysteric was an unruly woman affected by a disease known as the *hysterica passio*. Otherwise called Suffocation of the Mother, it is a disease where the womb finds itself "anoyed by some vnkind humor" and "the offence is communicated from thence vnto the rest of the body".[23] Drawing upon the humoral theory developed first by Hippocrates and later by Galen, Jorden believed that "the passiue condition of womankind is subiect vnto more diseases and of other sortes and natures then men are".[24] It is precisely the same belief King James and his contemporaries held. Despite its denomination, those afflicted with this uterine pathology were medically not mothers at all. In the words of Joanna Levin, the hysteric was "a disorderly woman who, whether by choice or by fate, could not live up to the demands of the sexual role inscribed within her body".[25] However, the construction of each of these women served a specific purpose: they were used as an occasion to glorify marriage, seen as the ultimate cure.

[21] Scot, p.6.
[22] Joanna Levin, "Lady MacBeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria", *ELH*, 69 (2002), p.30.
[23] Jorden, p.6.
[24] Jorden, p.1.
[25] Levin, p.34.

Both the witch and the hysteric became the opposite of the ideal mother, and the image of the breastfeeding and caring mother is inverted into a "Maternal Witch"[26] whose milk has been taken for gall. Witches in their rituals were believed to use animal parts as well as human parts, including "milk and blood"[27] to raise demons, hence the connection is rather an obvious one. This is enacted in Act 4 Scene 1 of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a tragic play which follows the rise and downfall of a Scottish nobleman, Macbeth, consumed by ambition and driven to murder to fulfil a prophecy of becoming king. The three witches foretell Macbeth's new titles, including that of Thane of Cawdor and the ultimate prophecy of becoming king, which ignites a dangerous ambition within him. After being greeted as Thane of Cawdor by Ross and Angus, Macbeth becomes convinced of the prospect of kingship. Yet the witches predict that his reign will be barren, while simultaneously foretelling that Banquo will issue a line of kings. Paranoid and eager to know what the future holds, Macbeth is determined to meet the Weïrd Sisters again, leading to a scene where they are casting a mysterious spell defined as "a deed without a name" (4.1.63).[28] Among the poisonous ingredients thrown into the bubbling cauldron figures the "finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-delivered by a drab" (4.1.30-1). The "birth-strangled babe" suggests sorcery might originate from maternity, and Lady Macbeth herself conjured "murd'ring ministers" and horrific images for the sole purpose to convince Macbeth to commit regicide. Act 4 Scene 1 stands as the singular occurrence where magic and spell-casting are explicitly portrayed. In Act 1 Scene 3 the focus is on prophesying the future, while in Act 1 Scene 5 is enacted the conjuring of demonic spirits whose task is to turn Lady Macbeth into an unnatural fiend capable of murdering her own child if only that could secure her husband's ascension to the Scottish throne. The Lady

[26] Spoto, p.66.
[27] Ben Jonson, quoted in Spoto, p.64.
[28] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. by Nicholas Brooke, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. All quotations from the play are taken from this edition.

of Inverness Castle is rather an intermediary figure as in her the transformation from witch into hysteric takes place: at the beginning of the play, she is seen invoking demonic spirits, whereas towards the end she has sunk into a fit of hysterical somnambulism. Although absent to herself, Lady Macbeth still presents a rather domineering sexuality as she instructs Macbeth to wash his hands carefully ("Out damned spot – out I say"; 5.1.33) and to come to bed. As a representative of disorderly femininity, Lady Macbeth is desperately in need of proper patriarchal governance.

1.2 Introduction to *Macbeth* (1606)

The biennium 1605 and 1606 proved to be extremely fruitful for William Shakespeare, as his playwrighting energies were spent on his outstanding tragedies, which mark a major shift in sensibility and a metaphysical darkening: *Timon of Athens*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. *The Tragedie of Macbeth* was presumably written between 1603[29] and 1606, and it was performed for the first time late that year at the Globe Theatre in London by The Lord Chamberlain's Men, a company of actors for which Shakespeare wrote during his lifetime. The company was founded already during the reign of Elizabeth I under the patronage of Henry Carey, the Lord Chamberlain in charge of court entertainment. After James I ascended to the English throne in 1603, the company changed its name to The King's Men in honour of its new Royal patron and held exclusive rights to perform Shakespeare's plays. Interest in Scotland had increased after the King's coronation, hence it is no surprise that *Macbeth* deals with Scotland and its thanes. Indeed, the play is believed to be a celebration of the House of Stuart's accession to the throne and the King's ancestors.[30] Scottish history contains a real-life King Duncan (Donnchad)

[29] Kenneth Muir, "Introduction", in William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare, London: Methuen, 1964, p.xvi.
[30] Brooke, p.71.

and Macbeth (Macbethad), while Banquo has no historical existence but is a figure of whom King James I believed himself to be a descendant. I would argue that having the Weïrd Sisters tell Banquo that "thou shalt get kings, though thou be none" (1.3.67) was Shakespeare's way to legitimize James I's rightful claim to the throne. The character of Banquo (Banquho) was borrowed from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles*, a collaborative work about the history of Britain, Scotland, and Ireland, which was first published in 1577. In Holinshed's *Chronicles* Banquo was an accomplice to Macbeth in the murder of Duncan, yet Shakespeare had carved out a different path for him so that James' ancestors would be portrayed in a different, more positive light. As Nicholas Brooke notes, "[Holinshed] formed the starting-point of a mythical genealogy which the Stuarts invented for themselves when they achieved monarchy in the fourteenth century".[31] As customary, playwrights did not work in isolation from their fellow playwrights, rather their works were heavily influenced by one another. Shakespeare was no exception. As previously anticipated, the main source for his play was undoubtedly Holinshed's *Chronicles*, of England and Scotland, in the second edition which appeared in 1587.[32] It is also possible that Shakespeare consulted other sources, namely George Buchanan's *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (1582).[33] Surely, Shakespeare made several alterations which result in an emphasis on psychological and moral implications. Besides Banquo being a bystander and not an accomplice to Macbeth, in Holinshed's *Chronicles* Duncan is young and incompetent, conversely in the play he is older and wiser. Whereas in the *Chronicles* Macbeth is driven by political motivations, in the play he is driven by ambition and greed.

Macbeth is the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies, and it is his most ghastly work as no other play is so focused on the planning, act, and aftermath of murder. Moreover,

[31] Brooke, p.68.
[32] Brooke, p.67.
[33] Muir, p.xxxix.

the play clearly reflects the monarch's interest in witchcraft as his *Daemonologie* proves. The opening scene establishes a gloomy, pervasive atmosphere. Three witches, "the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science",[34] establish an environment of moral ambiguity that encloses all Scotland, making it descend into chaos and violence. They meet Banquo and Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, greeting him with three titles: Thane of Glamis, his present position, Thane of Cawdor, and King of Scotland. A sceptical but rather curious Banquo asks them to "look into the seeds of time" (1.3.58) to project his future. Although he will not be King, he will sire a line of Kings. This is an immediate reference to James I's ancestry. Once the Weïrd Sisters have vanished in the air, Ross and Angus greet Macbeth with his new title, Thane of Cawdor. Banquo is amazed ("What, can the devil speak true?"; 1.3.107) that what the witches predicted has so far come true, whereas Macbeth does not understand why they "dress [him] / In borrow'd robes" (1.3.108-9). The betrayal and consequent execution of the former Thane of Cawdor allows Macbeth to rise up in rankings. Macbeth is preoccupied with being addressed with a title that was not his, and his amazed question foreshadows Macbeth's later usurpation of a title – that of King of Scotland. Seeing that the witches can be somewhat trustworthy, Macbeth is already thinking of murdering King Duncan as he is certain that the third prophecy will come true as well. As soon as the King appoints his son Malcolm as his lawful heir, the Prince of Cumberland, Macbeth starts to covet greedily the desire to be King. The thought shakes him, yet it is the first solution that comes to mind. Then, the King and his guards leave for Inverness Castle, Macbeth's residence, where a joyful Lady Macbeth will be waiting for them.

[34] Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of Britain, Scotland, and Ireland*, quoted in "Appendix A" in William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare, London: Methuen, 1964, p.178.

The castle's entrance is guarded by the Porter, who believes that "if a man were porter of / Hell gate, he should have old turning the key" (2.3.1-2). The connection with Hell is rather obvious as soon as Macbeth calls on the stars to "hide [their] fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.51-52), and when Lady Macbeth calls on the spirits to fill her "from the crown to the toe, top-full / Of direst cruelty" (1.5.41-42). Lady Macbeth's first appearance is in Act 1 Scene 5, where she is informed by Macbeth's letter of his new title and the possibility of becoming King. Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth is afraid that her husband is not manly enough to be driven by his ambition as he is "too full o'th' milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way" (1.5.16-17). Immediately after having been informed of Duncan's imminent arrival, Lady Macbeth summons "murd'ring ministers" to take her "milk for gall" (1.5.47). In the words of Stephanie Spoto, here "Lady Macbeth demands to become un-gendered, un-feminized, and de-maternalized", her milk becomes "the food of demons, forsaking the possibility of human offspring and reproduction".[35] Lady Macbeth here plays on the reversal of gender roles: she has adopted the role of 'man of action', forcing her husband into the more passive role of an accomplice by repeatedly questioning his manhood. While Macbeth is afraid of forever losing his innocence, Lady Macbeth would sacrifice her child, the very symbol of the innocence Macbeth risks losing, in order for her husband to be King.

In the opinion of Kathleen McLuskie,[36] the play is structured in three movements: in the first attention is focused on Macbeth's contemplation of murder; in the second, Macbeth realises that Banquo represents a threat to his kingship; in the third, Scotland rebels against its tyrant. The bell is Macbeth's cue to kill the King and to place the guilt on the two servants outside Duncan's door, who were drunk enough to sleep throughout

[35] Spoto, p.66.
[36] Kathleen McLuskie, "*Macbeth*, the Present, and the Past" in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume I: The Tragedies*, ed. by Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard, London: John Wiley & Sons, 2003, p.394.

the act. The reversal of roles Lady Macbeth anticipated cannot occur now: Macbeth has done what she would have done if only Duncan had not resembled her father. The following morning, after the comic relief provided by the Porter's monologue, Macbeth leads Macduff to the King's chamber so as to wake him up. It was crucial for Macbeth to be seen at the crime scene at the exact moment when Macduff discovered Duncan's body in order to clear out any suspicions. Indeed, he is quick enough to swear to "put on manly readiness" (2.3.135) to avenge his King. Both Malcolm and Donalbain flee the country afraid that they will be victims of this violence as well, and they move respectively to England and Ireland. The first movement ends in Act 2 Scene 4 when Macbeth has been named King and has already left for Scone, the traditional place where Scottish kings are crowned. The second movement starts in Act 3, where Macbeth's reign turns into tyranny when he remembers the witches' prophecy regarding Banquo and his offspring. Afraid that Banquo and his son Fleance would jeopardise his dynasty, Macbeth instructs two murderers to kill both of them before the banquet where Banquo's presence had been highly requested. Lady Macbeth has already been demoted from her role of counsellor as she has only been informed of Banquo's murder after Macbeth had already given the order. Immediately prior to the feast, the hitman reports to Macbeth that they successfully killed Banquo, although Fleance fled. He will not be an immediate threat as Macbeth made sure to spread rumours about Fleance being responsible for his father's death. It would seem like Macbeth has nothing to worry about, yet his mind has been dreadfully poisoned and thinking of murder now comes naturally to him. In what seems the last heartfelt conversation with his wife, Macbeth reveals that he is "in blood / Stepped in so far, that should [he] wade no more / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (3.4.137-9). He needs the witches to disclose the worst of what is to come as he has some plans "in head, that will to hand, / Which must be acted, ere they may be scanned" (3.4.140-1).

Surely the witches play with human vulnerabilities and Macbeth's frailties are exploitable, but Macbeth is a free agent and controls his own destiny.

The witches show him four images, the first one telling him to beware Macduff, Thane of Fife. The second image is quite relieving "for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.94-5). Although he has no reason to fear Macduff, who nonetheless suspects Macbeth of having murdered the King, Macbeth resolves to slaughter his family. This is the first murder he plans without the counsel of his wife, and it is the first killing for its own sake. The third apparition "rises like the issue of a king, / And wears upon his baby-brow the round / And top of sovereignty" (4.1.101-3). The crowned child reassures Macbeth that he will be defeated only when "great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinan Hill / Shall come against him" (4.1.108-9). The likelihood of woods and trees moving is exceedingly low, if not close to impossible. Macbeth is rather pleased with his perceived invincibility and could easily retire at this point, yet he has one final question for the witches: "Shall Banquo's issue ever / Reign in this kingdom?" (4.1.117-8). The witches advise him to "seek to know no more" (4.1.118), but Macbeth commands them to answer his question otherwise "an eternal curse fall on you" (4.1.120). The fourth apparition shows eight kings and Banquo, leading him to conclude that they are Banquo's descendants. He finally realises the possibility of an entirely "Macbethless" future: not having a child of his own, his dynasty is doomed ("What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?"; 4.1.132).

Slowly, Lady Macbeth sinks into madness, the immediate evidence being her sleepwalking in Act 5. I would contend that Lady Macbeth is now bearing the guilt for everything wicked her husband has done. At the beginning of the play, she reassured Macbeth that they would place the blame on someone else ("What not put upon / His spongy officers who shall bear the guilt / Of our great quell?"; 1.7.71-3), but it seems that

she is the one suffering now. Although she is merely considered by Macbeth as far as his plans are concerned, Lady Macbeth is still the only person capable of putting Macbeth's mind and soul at ease. Her descent into madness is not shown until Act 5 Scene 1, when the Gentlewoman and the Doctor observe her sleepwalking. She rubs her hands vigorously as she is afraid that they will "ne'er be clean" (5.1.41), yet who "would have thought the old man to have had so much / blood in him" (5.1.37-8). This echoes her line "a little water clears us of this deed" (2.2.66) in response to her husband's preoccupation: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" (2.2.59-60). The physician believes her illness had long surpassed the field of science and it is now a matter of religion. Although Macbeth urged the Doctor to find a cure for Lady Macbeth ("Cure her of that: / Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased"; 5.3.38-9), once the news of his wife's passing reaches his ear, he is not surprised as "she should have died hereafter" (5.5.17). Macbeth's conversion into a cold-hearted, insensitive-to-tears human being is now complete. Fully convinced that his reign was bound to last for eternity, Macbeth's awareness is restored when a messenger reports that "the wood began to move" (5.5.35). This is the very moment Macbeth realises that the witches' final prophecies were not true. He is not unkillable, and Macduff's rage confirms that he has not long to live. "Macduff was from his mother's womb / untimely ripped" (5.7.45-6), and thus the only man capable of restoring Scotland to its old glory. Macduff was born prematurely by Caesarian section, as Nicholas Brooke suggests, "presumably because of the sickness or death of his mother".[37] Being born in an "unconventional way", Macduff is the only one able to pose a threat to Macbeth.

[37] Brooke in Shakespeare, Act 5 Scene 7, note 46, p.208.

CHAPTER 2

AMBITION AND DOMINANCE AS A MALE TRAIT

Ambition is the prime mover of the play, hence it is fitting to provide a proper definition of the term. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reports that "ambition" could be described as a "desire for achievement, advancement, or honour", yet it could also be "the action of seeking to obtain an office or position through underhand means".[1] Indeed this is what happens to the Macbeths. Lady Macbeth has read her husband's report on what happened, how three witches foretold his new title as Thane of Cawdor and the most ambitious position he could ever dream of – that of King of Scotland. Although Macbeth was the first to think about murdering Duncan to ensure his title for himself, surely it was Lady Macbeth's influence that made him do it. Lady Macbeth repeatedly questions her husband's manhood, believing he is "too full o'th' milk of human kindness" (1.5.16) to proceed with their plan to murder the King. She interprets his hesitation and reluctance as signs of weakness, hence he is far from the ideal man Lady Macbeth thinks her husband should be. As D. W. Harding brilliantly notes, Shakespeare has constructed the play to present "manliness as lived by the man and manliness seen in the distorting fantasy of the woman".[2] This precisely exemplifies Lady Macbeth's behaviour, as she continually doubts her husband's manliness. Whereas she would like her husband to seize the opportunity of a lifetime, Macbeth's masculinity is frail. In the words of Frederick Morgan Padelford, Macbeth "shrinks from the atrocious deed only because he is a coward

[1] "ambition, n., sense II.6". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5377660941, accessed July 2023.
[2] Dennis W. Harding, "Women's Fantasy of Manhood: A Shakespearian Theme", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 20 (1969), p.245.

at heart".[3] Conversely, Lady Macbeth's character exhibits a level of assertiveness that surpasses Macbeth's. This makes her a figurative embodiment of masculinity, successfully doubling the qualities typically associated with the male protagonist. Indeed, the reversal of roles Lady Macbeth plays here is crucial. "The confusion generated when men and women assume the identity and characteristics of the opposite sex", Andrew Hadfield explains, "mak[es] the audience reflect on the question of what actually distinguishes men and women apart from obvious physical differences".[4] This could be explained, once again, through the humoral theory. Due to their cold and moist nature, women were believed to be inferior and passive and their "individual temper may deviate from the norm and turn to masculine models".[5]

The concept of masculinity is explored through three main and five secondary male characters, each representing different facets of manhood. Macbeth's masculinity is rather ambitious and will later become toxic. Drawing once again from the humoral theory, Massimo Rinaldi translates another significant passage dealing with the different temperaments of the male body, hot and dry. While this temperature "may produce the best spirits, [it] has two evil aspects, which may impede the logical course of reason, and thus force it to deviate from the right path of virtue".[6] Indeed, Macbeth is initially a skilful and brave soldier who, immediately after his encounter with the witches, starts to wrestle with his conscience and he is quite torn between ambition and his loyalty to the King. Whereas he was the one who first "[broke] this enterprise" (1.7.48) to his wife, Macbeth believes that ambition is not enough to justify the regicide ("I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th'other"; 1.7.25-28). What follows is a dialogue between the couple where Lady

[3] Frederick Morgan Padelford, "Macbeth the Thane and Macbeth the Regicide", *Modern Language Notes*, 16 (1901), p.117.
[4] Andrew Hadfield, *The English Renaissance. 1500-1620*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, pp.253-4.
[5] Marcello Donati, quoted in Rinaldi, forthcoming.
[6] Vincenzo Maggi, quoted in Rinaldi, forthcoming.

Macbeth questions for the first time her husband's manhood and courage. In the end, the dialogue will prove fruitful as Macbeth has gathered enough courage to finally "become a man" (1.7.46).

LADY MACBETH […] Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would',
Like the poor cat i'th' adage?

MACBETH Prithee peace:
I dare do all that may become a man,
Who dares do more is none.

LADY MACBETH What beast was't then
That made you break this enterprise to me?
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. (1.7.39-51)

According to James J. Greene, Macbeth has reached a point where he no longer hesitates, and he is prepared for the "final stage", which will enable his wife to perceive him as a man.[7] Undoubtedly, as the play progresses Macbeth's actions become more ruthless and power-driven, aligning with more conventional notions of masculinity associated with unchecked ambition and violence. Yet, this is not the only occasion when Lady Macbeth goads her husband into acting as a man. A case in point is the banquet scene in Act 3. Macbeth arranges a banquet and fervently asks Banquo to attend, but he will never make an appearance as Macbeth instructs three murderers to kill him on his evening walk with his son, Fleance. Lady Macbeth, who was actively involved in the planning of Duncan's murder, is worried about her husband isolating himself "using those thoughts which should indeed have died / With them they think on" (3.2.11-2). She would like her husband to seek counsel from her and, quite possibly, to share this burden. However, Macbeth advises her to "be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud

[7] James J. Greene, "Macbeth: Masculinity as Murder", *American Imago*, 41 (1984), p.162.

the deed" (3.2.48-9) so that they can "make our faces / Vizards to our hearts, disguising what they are" (3.2.36-7). This expression draws upon Lady Macbeth's lines in Act 1 Scene 5 where she recommends her husband "to beguile the time / Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue – look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't" (1.5.62-5). These lines invite Macbeth to deceive the King and his court by acting as a welcoming host while he harbours evil thoughts. The three murderers have successfully killed Banquo, yet they have to break the news to their Lord that "Fleance is scaped" (3.4.19). Macbeth's torment returns as he fears that someday Fleance will return and threaten his dynasty. The imagery of confinement and constraint used ("But now I am cabined, cribbled, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears"; 3.4.24-5) as a response to this terrible fate foreshadows Act 5 Scene 7 when Macbeth will be physically trapped by the advancing English army led by Macduff. Additionally troubled by his "fit[s]" (3.4.55), Macbeth becomes unhinged upon witnessing Banquo's ghost occupying his place. In an attempt to restore the King's sanity, Lady Macbeth questions his manhood once more. She fears that his foolishness has destroyed his manhood, yet at the ghost's disappearance Macbeth is a man once again. The conviction that the witches' prophecies had come true drives Macbeth into a vicious circle where only more bloodshed could quench the thirst for violence. Undoubtedly, a night of peaceful sleep could have calmed his restless soul, had he not deprived himself of it by committing murder ("Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more; / Macbeth does murder sleep, the innocent sleep'"; 2.2.34-5, "Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more – Macbeth shall sleep no more"; 2.2.41-2). I would contend that while in the first murder the couple shared the guilt and placed the blame onto Duncan's servants, this time Macbeth bore the burden alone, and it was likely too overwhelming for him to bear. The situation will deteriorate when Macbeth commands the killing of Lady Macduff and her children. As anticipated, this will mark the first

instance of a killing in which he does not follow anybody's advice. The exploration of Macbeth's masculinity is an intricate aspect of the play, with his character experiencing significant changes throughout the narrative.

Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth is not the sole character questioning another man's manliness. In Act 3 Macbeth hires two men to kill Banquo and his son, Fleance. Quite possibly, they have already been instructed as to why they were summoned before the King. Macbeth makes it known to them that Banquo is the man responsible for their miserable lives, and he now presents himself as the one who will guarantee them a better life. Their willingness to commit murder for monetary gain indicates a ruthless and unchecked form of masculinity. Macbeth is instilling anger and desire for revenge by questioning their manhood, hence by using the same methods his wife used with him once before.

MACBETH […] Do you find your patience so
Predominant in your nature, that you can let this go?
Are you so gospelled to pray for this good man, and for
His issue, whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the
Grave and beggared yours for ever?

FIRST MURDERER We are men, my liege.

MACBETH Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men,
[…]
Now, if you have a station in the file
Not i'th' worst rank of manhood, say't,
And I will put that business in your bosoms,
Whose execution takes your enemy off,
Grapples you to the heart and love of us
Who wear our health but sickly in his life,
Which in his death were perfect. (3.1.86-108)

Banquo's murder is enacted in Act 3 Scene 3. The two murderers are joined by a third man whom they initially look at with suspicion. Having been hired by Macbeth, the Second Murderer feels like "he needs not our mistrust, since he delivers / Our offices and what we have to do / To the direction just" (3.3.2-4). Many scholars have speculated about the identity of the Third Murderer being either Macbeth himself or Destiny, but according

to Nicholas Brooke it is "absurd".[8] Kenneth Muir appears to share Brooke's opinion, defining these views as "fantastic". Indeed, "Macbeth's agitation when he hears that Fleance has escaped is proof that he cannot have been present at the murder of Banquo". Most likely, the Third Murderer is a spy hired by Macbeth, who "feels he must spy even upon his chosen instruments".[9] This decision clearly highlights Macbeth's descent into tyranny and paranoia.

Banquo is the noblest thane, whose principled masculinity is in contrast with Macbeth's. When the witches' prophecies predict that Macbeth will become king, Banquo is wary of the supernatural and does not let ambition cloud his judgment. However, he remains quite curious to discover his fate and will soon come to know that he will sire a line of kings, "though thou be none" (1.3.67). Initially, neither of them entirely believed the witches' prophecies, to the extent that Banquo even pondered if they had consumed the "insane root / That takes the reason prisoner" (1.3.84-5). When Macbeth is given the title of Thane of Cawdor by Ross and Angus, Banquo is astonished since he had not believed that "the devil [could] speak true" (1.3.107). In terms of divergence, Banquo and Macbeth can be distinguished by the fact that Banquo does not actively pursue the throne as "oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence" (1.3.124-7). Just like Macbeth, Banquo cannot help dreaming of the Weïrd Sisters. In Act 2 Scene 1 Banquo and his son are walking in an eerie forest discussing the night's occurrences, including the strange behaviour of Macbeth before the King's murder ("[…] merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose"; 2.1.8-10). Evidently, Banquo expresses a sense of uneasiness and suspicion concerning Macbeth's abrupt ascension to authority. His uneasiness stems from the rapid

[8] Brooke in Shakespeare, Act 3 Scene 3, note 0, p.151.
[9] Muir in Shakespeare, Act 3 Scene 3, note 0, p.90.

fulfilment of the witches' prophecies in favour of Macbeth, leading Banquo to harbour doubts about the legitimacy of his companion's newly acquired power. The two are joined by Macbeth, with whom Banquo engages in a conversation revealing that he dreamed of the witches the previous night. Macbeth's response contains a series of allusions that hint at his future kingship. In this context, Macbeth assures Banquo that if he stands by him when the opportune moment arrives, he will be duly rewarded and esteemed for his loyalty. According to Kenneth Muir's interpretation, Banquo is telling Macbeth that he will ally with him only if there are no deceitful or treacherous actions involved.[10] Brooke's interpretation highlights Banquo's phrase "bosom franchised" (2.1.29) as proof of his unwavering integrity as "the franchisement (like the allegiance after it) is simultaneously from his own corruption and from binding himself to a corrupt master".[11] In Act 3 Scene 1 Banquo's apprehensions find expression in a soliloquy where he voices his concerns: "Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all / As the Weïrd Women promised, and I fear / Thou played'st most foully for't" (3.1.1-3). After Macbeth's accession to the throne through deceitful means, the latter becomes increasingly paranoid and perceives threats from potential rivals and traitors around him. His obsession centres on the Weïrd Sisters' prophecy to Banquo. Fearing that Banquo's descendants might pose a threat to his own lineage ("Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, / And put a barren sceptre in my gripe"; 3.1.60-1), Macbeth hires two murderers to eliminate both Banquo and his son, Fleance. As Muir aptly puts it, Macbeth "fears [Banquo] also because of his own sense of guilt".[12] The guilt and paranoia resulting from the murder of his former friend led Macbeth to spiral into madness and tyranny.

[10] Muir in Shakespeare, Act 2 Scene 1, note 26-8, p.48.
[11] Brooke in Shakespeare, Act 2 Scene 1, note 29, p.123.
[12] Muir in Shakespeare, p.lii.

I would contend that both Banquo and Macduff, the Thane of Fife, exemplify and fulfil the ideal of manhood. Macduff's masculinity serves as a stark contrast to the destructive masculinity exhibited by Macbeth and other male characters in the play, namely the Three Murderers. Macduff is portrayed as a strong and honourable man who is dedicated to his family and country. Indeed, "Macduff is a complete man: he is a valiant soldier, ready to perform "manly" deeds, but is neither ashamed of "humane" feelings nor unaware of his moral responsibilities".[13] Macduff is the one who discovers Duncan's corpse, breaking the news to everyone: "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence / The life o'th' building" (2.3.69-71). Macduff's announcement, "Our royal master's murdered" (2.3.89), is not delivered in isolation but it is either preceded or followed by a series of lines where the murder is described metaphorically, as if he hesitates to directly name the deed. Phrases like "[…] destroy your sight / With a new Gorgon" (2.3.73-4), "[…] see / The great doom's image" (2.4.79-80) depict the murder in a figurative fashion. Macduff's words convey genuine concern and despair unlike Macbeth, whose utterances are imbued with guilt: "The wine of life is drawn" (2.3.97), "The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood / Is stopped, the very source of it is stopped" (2.3.100-1). All swear to take action and both Malcolm and Donalbain decide to flee the country, a move which will unfortunately put "upon them / Suspicion of the deed" (2.4.26-7). Although Macduff does not explicitly voice his suspicion about Macbeth's involvement in the murder of Duncan, there is still a subtle hint when Macduff tells Ross that he may "see things well done here" (2.4.37). Indeed, as Brooke points out, the repetition of "well" – uttered once by Ross ("Well, I will thither"; 2.4.36) and twice by Macduff in the same sentence, stresses the irony.[14] He did not follow the King's court to Scone, the traditional place where Scottish kings were

[13] Eugene M. Waith, "Manhood and Valor in Two Shakespearean Tragedies", *ELH*, 17, 4 (1950), p.267.
[14] Brooke in Shakespeare, Act 2 Scene 4, note 36-7, p.141.

crowned. During the early stages of Macbeth's reign, Macduff sincerely hopes that their new King is as suited to the role as their old King was ("Lest our old robes sit easier than our new"; 2.4.38). Nevertheless, Macduff does not join the banquet thrown by Macbeth and his "fiend-like Queen" (5.7.99) as he travelled all way to England to meet Malcolm, Prince of Cumberland, and to ask him to recruit an army. Macduff wishes to defeat Macbeth and to restore Scotland to its old glory with Malcolm's ascension to the throne. In these excerpts, Macduff's masculinity is depicted as a complex and multifaceted trait as he embodies loyalty, bravery, emotional depth, and a sense of justice, symbolising resistance against Macbeth's oppressive rule.

The focus of this analysis will now revolve around the different types of masculinity exhibited by secondary characters, namely King Duncan and his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain. King Duncan is Scotland's gentle and kind father, reflecting the prevailing belief that the King held both the position of Head of the State and of the household. In the words of Stephanie Spoto, James I "positioned himself as the father of a family politically and religiously unified" and thus "demanded to be viewed as divinely sanctioned authority with absolute powers".[15] Duncan is an extremely trusting soul, which nonetheless makes him vulnerable to treachery. Indeed, the former Thane of Cawdor was "a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust" (1.4.13-14) and still betrayed the King by siding with the enemy, the Norwegian King.

DUNCAN	No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present death, And with his former title greet Macbeth.
ROSS	I'll see it done.
DUNCAN	What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won. (1.2.64-8)

R. Walker points out that the "last title applied to the Thane of Cawdor was "that most disloyal traitor"", Kenneth Muir reports.[16] It is quite ironic how this title foreshadows

[15] Spoto, p.63.
[16] Muir in Shakespeare, Act 1 Scene 2, note 68, p.11.

Macbeth's consequent treason, leading me to argue that Duncan's line ("He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust"; 1.4.13-4) becomes even more fitting when applied to Macbeth. After being "dress[ed]" with what Macbeth thinks are "borrowed robes", Banquo and Macbeth are summoned before the King, who greets them with metaphors related to nature, almost as if Scotland were a vast garden with himself as the caretaker: "Welcome hither: / I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing" (1.4.28-30). Duncan has metaphorically sown the seeds of Macbeth's future – his title as Thane of Cawdor – and is determined to nurture and ensure his growth and prosperity. Once more we are confronted with Banquo's and Macbeth's contrasting personalities: whereas Macbeth is already coveting thoughts that shake "so [his] single state of mind" (1.3.41), Banquo's lines ("There if I grow / The harvest is your own"; 1.4.33-4) show loyalty to the King. Nevertheless, Duncan's efforts will culminate in the harvest of treachery and death. Scotland will descend into chaos after Macbeth's reprehensible act: Duncan's horses, as reported by Ross in a conversation with an Old Man, act like they are making "war with mankind" (2.4.18). As Spoto notes, "since James stressed the relationship between King and Father, the king's murder breaches many of James's laws and violates several of the principles in his writings".[17] Shakespeare reconnects the murder of Duncan to James I in Lady Macbeth's inability to kill Duncan ("Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't"; 2.2.13-4). While the guilt has been placed on Duncan's servants, Malcolm and Donalbain are suspected to have ordered the assassination. Ross, a nobleman who acts as a messenger throughout the play, believes that such an ambition is destructive as it causes sons to commit parricide ("'Gainst nature still – / Thriftless ambition, that will raven up / Thine own life's means"; 2.4.27-9). I would argue that, drawing once more on the idea of Duncan as father and caretaker of Scotland, Macbeth can figuratively be considered Duncan's son as he gave

[17] Spoto, p.65.

him the title of Thane of Cawdor and promised to ensure his prosperity. I find confirmation of my hypothesis in R. Walker's words, always reported by Kenneth Muir in his edition of *Macbeth*. Walker comments: "Ostensibly the words relate to Malcolm and Donalbain. […] But how much better the words describe Macbeth!".[18] Furthermore, Greene's analysis of the four apparitions shown to Macbeth fits perfectly as he portrays Macbeth as a tyrant responsible for Duncan's murder as well as for Macduff's children's homicide. As a "murdering king" and "murderer of children" he is "sterile, a non-begetter […], a fact symbolized by the bloody child of the second apparition": he has slain the "fertility god".[19]

Even if Malcolm and Donalbain are suspected of murdering their father, they still exhibit a positive kind of masculinity. Donalbain is a pragmatic and self-preserving man, who decides to flee to Ireland. They realise that one of the thanes present at the crime scene is probably the murderer and they fear that they will be the next targets: "[…]; where we are / There's daggers in men's smiles – the near in blood, / The nearer bloody" (2.3.141-3). Donalbain's masculinity prioritises safety over immediate political action, and his cautious approach highlights the sense of danger and unrest in the kingdom. Malcolm, the appointed heir, knows that "this murderous shaft that's shot / Hath not yet lighted, and our safest way / Is to avoid the aim" (2.3.143-5) and flees to England. Malcolm exhibits active leadership and bravery as he takes on the responsibility of leading an army to fight to reclaim his father's throne. In the words of Harding, "Malcolm's [masculinity] is the orthodox view of manliness"[20] as he exemplifies virtuousness and a strong sense of responsibility. Moreover, Malcolm shows a certain degree of wisdom as he pretends to be just like Macbeth, at times even worse, with the

[18] Muir in Shakespeare, Act 2 Scene 4, note 27-9, p.73.
[19] Greene, p.172.
[20] Harding, p.250.

sole purpose of testing Macduff's loyalty. Due to his lack of experience, Malcolm fears that Macduff "may discern of him through me, and wisdom / To offer up a weak, poor, innocent lamb / T'appease an angry God" (4.3.15-7). Later on, Malcolm presents himself in a disgraceful manner, so that in comparison Macbeth "will seem as pure as snow" (4.3.53). Once he ensures Macduff's genuine concern for Scotland's well-being, Malcolm confesses that he is not as he had previously portrayed himself.

MALCOLM Macduff, this noble passion,
Child of integrity, hath from my soul
Wiped the black scruples, reconciled my thoughts
To thy good truth, and honour. Devilish Macbeth,
By many of these traits, hath sought to win me
Into his power; and modest wisdom plucks me
From over-credulous haste – but God above
Deal between thee and me; for even now
I put myself to thy direction, and
Unspeak mine own detraction: here abjure
The taints and blames I laid upon myself,
For strangers to my nature. (4.3.14-25).

After having heard the news of the murder of Macduff's wife and children by the tyrant's order, Malcolm advises Macduff to "dispute it like a man" (4.3.219) yet Macduff is not afraid of showing his feelings ("I shall do so: / But I must also feel it as a man"; 4.3.220-1). This is the only time in the play when "manliness is associated with tender feelings".[21] Nevertheless, the main idea of the play – that of manhood proved through violent acts – emerges once more.

MACDUFF […]. But gentle heavens,
Cut short all intermission: front to front
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself,
Within my sword's length set him – if he scape,
Heaven forgive him too.
MALCOLM This time goes manly –
Come, go we to the King, our power is ready,
Our lack is nothing but our leave. Macbeth
Is ripe for shaking, and the powers above
Put on their instruments; receive what cheer you may,
The night is long that never finds the day. (4.3.231-240).

[21] milk, p.177.

Since the Scottish monarchy did not necessarily follow primogeniture, it made sense for the Weïrd Sisters to predict Fleance and his offspring as a dynasty succeeding Macbeth. My question is why the witches did not mention either Donalbain or Malcolm in their prophecies, the latter being clearly the only man virtuous enough to pursue his late father's path. Although this is not made explicit, the Weïrd Sisters might have seen, when they looked "in the seeds of time", that Macbeth's plan to kill Banquo and his son, Fleance, would be rather unsuccessful. Not once but twice the witches predicted that Banquo would father a line of kings, despite Macbeth's efforts to frame Fleance for parricide. Fleance is clearly a symbol of legacy and hope for a brighter future, where Macbeth's tyranny would be overthrown by a more glorious and virtuous reign, specifically under Malcolm's leadership. One explanation might be that Malcolm either remained unmarried, leading to a lack of heirs, or he died at a young age. This could explain why the witches' prophecies suggested a long reign for Banquo's descendants instead of Duncan's, as Malcolm's "barren sceptre" resulted in the throne passing to Banquo's lineage.

CHAPTER 3

LADY MACBETH, "THE FIEND-LIKE QUEEN"

3.1 Femininity in *Macbeth*

During the English Renaissance women were either described as "faithful or faithless, wanton or chaste, sensuous or cold". They can be further distinguished by two substantial concepts, that of the evil Eve and that of the saintly Virgin Mary.[1] Kay Stockholder explains that when women are powerful and sexual "they are the source of and represent a cosmic principle of evil. When they are powerless and remote from sexuality, they are the source of and represent a principle of redeeming purity and compassion".[2] I would argue that these two concepts are applicable to the characters of Lady Macbeth and the three witches, who fall into the category of the evil Eve, and to the characters of Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth's Gentlewoman, who fall into the category of the saintly Virgin Mary. As I will elaborate further in this chapter, these categories do not fully encompass the women in question. As the play progresses, these characters exhibit traits that either fall into the other category or evolve beyond them, ultimately belonging to neither. This transformation is especially evident in the case of Lady Macbeth.

With my third chapter I aim to present the different female characters Shakespeare created for his tragedy and I intend to achieve this by conducting an analysis of each character, highlighting key attributes that have contributed to their inclusion in the previously mentioned categories. The first subchapter will focus on the physical and

[1] Hull, pp.106-7.
[2] Kay Stockholder, "Idea and Desire: Manichean Images of Women in Shakespeare's Plays", *CEA Critic*, 52, ½ (1989), p.33.

mysterious appearance of the Weïrd Sisters, the dual nature of Lady Macduff, and the remarkable loyalty displayed by Lady Macbeth's Gentlewoman. Additionally, I provide a brief introduction to the character of Hecate as I believe her role contributes to the overall understanding of the play, despite her minor significance. Furthermore, the second section of this chapter will focus solely on the character of Lady Macbeth, exploring her behaviour from the beginning of the play and tracing her gradual descent into madness.

The beginning of the play sets the tone with a sombre atmosphere. The Weïrd Sisters, a trio of witches serving the Ancient Greek goddess Hecate, convene in an unspecified location amidst thunder and lightning. As David L. Kranz points out, Shakespeare's witches are "complex": they are simultaneously human, supernatural, transsexual, related to demons or fairies, and capable of making fatal predictions.[3] Their purpose is to discuss the time and place of their next meeting, during which they shall utter the prophecies that will determine Macbeth's fate. Their first apparition in Act 1 Scene 1 ends with the famous lines: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.11-2). According to Derek A. Traversi, "through the calculated ambiguity of their utterance and through the elemental commotion which surrounds them", the Weïrd Sisters "prepare the way for the entry of evil and disintegration into a state which has been, under Duncan, positive, natural, and orderly".[4]

Henry N. Paul argues that Shakespeare knew John Leslie's *De Origine, Moribus, et Rebus Gestis Scotorum* (1578), "in which the Weïrd Sisters are devils disguised as women, as they may be in Shakespeare's play".[5] Greene believes that a seventeenth-century audience "would instinctively recognize these three creatures as witches" as "the popular imagination automatically associated witches with perverse sexuality and

[3] David L. Kranz, "The Sounds of Supernatural Soliciting in 'Macbeth'", *Studies in Philology*, 100 (2003), p.368.
[4] Traversi, p.152.
[5] Muir, p.xxxix.

sterility, since they were believed to have intercourse with Satan".[6] It is important to understand that the witches cannot be reduced to "projections of Macbeth's mind" as they are visible to Banquo as well. The Weïrd Sisters are extremely ambiguous characters both in terms of appearance and in terms of their power. Banquo fails to understand whether they are men, women ("You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so"; 1.3.45-7), or supernatural beings ("What are these, / So withered, and so wild in their attire, / That look not like th'inhabitants o'th' earth / And yet are on't?"; 1.3.39-42, "I'th' name of truth, / Are ye fantastical, or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?"; 1.3.52-4, "Whither are they vanished? / Into the air; and what seemed corporal melted / As breath into the wind"; 1.3.80-2). Banquo's description of the Weïrd Sister recalls, once again, Holinshed's descriptions of them: "three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world". Immediately after, Holinshed reveals that these women were "the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromanticall science, bicause euerie thing came to passe as they had spoken".[7] I would argue that their complex and multifaceted nature allows for various interpretations, making them intriguing and enigmatic figures in the play. Instead, we know that the Sisters' main function is to foretell the future, "the nature of their powers is still ambiguous" and it is precisely their ambiguity that is "fundamental to the ambiguities of experience and knowledge which the play develops".[8] Another facet of the witches that may be associated with femininity, in addition to their enigmatic feminine appearance, is their connection to the natural world. This further aligns them with feminine archetypes found in mythology, a

[6] Greene, p.171.
[7] Holinshed, quoted in "Appedix A" in Shakespeare, p.178.
[8] Brooke, p.3.

connection notably highlighted in Act 4 Scene 1. The opening of the scene presents the three witches involved in performing a "deed without a name" (4.1.63):

ALL Double, double, toil and trouble
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.
SECOND WITCH Fillet of fenny snake
In the cauldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog;
Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing:
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble. (4.1.10-19)

The ingredients thrown in the cauldron are dismembered body parts and entrails of loathed animals, moreover the broken and macabre imagery extends to human beings, such as the "liver of blaspheming Jew" (4.1.26) and the "nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips" (4.1.29). Of utmost significance is the inclusion of the "finger of a birth-strangled babe / Ditch-delivered by a drab" (4.1.30-1). It is evident that all these ingredients are poisonous and collectively symbolize the creation of a monstrous entity. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the bearded women foretell Macbeth's arrival ("By the pricking of my thumbs, / Something wicked this way comes – / Open locks, whoever knocks. [*Enter Macbeth*]"; 4.1.59-61). It is ironic that the cue for Macbeth to enter the stage is marked by these last lines: "a very ancient superstition that all sudden pains of the body, which could not naturally be accounted for, were presages of somewhat that was shortly to happen".[9] I believe it is crucial to observe the unnatural aspect of nature within the play, especially when we consider how characters discuss nature, often foreshadowing future events. Instead of presenting us with pleasant aspects of nature, the play delves into the innards of animals, linking them to a supernatural and unsettling natural world. Certainly, this further reinforces the notion we gather from witches using such ingredients for their spellcasting. Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that the inner nature of the characters

[9] Steevens, quoted in Muir in Shakespeare, Act 4 Scene 1, note 44, p.112.

has a profound impact on their surroundings. For instance, under Duncan's benevolent and just rule Scotland thrived as a vast, flourishing garden. However, once Macbeth seizes power and begins harbouring malevolent and immoral thoughts, Scotland's natural environment deteriorates, and the idyllic nights described by Banquo and his son have now come to an end.

To conclude my discussion on the Weïrd Sisters and their being representations of "unnatural evil",[10] I would argue that the witches exert a form of power on Macbeth as they influence his actions by triggering his unchecked ambition. In doing so, I believe they align with the concept of the evil Eve, serving as temptresses in their own right. Although the Sisters have the ability to control and shape events, it is important to notice that they "do not plant the seeds of evil in Macbeth"[11] although they "penetrate the bodies and minds of those they mean to destroy".[12]

Hecate, the classical goddess of the lower world who represents the spirits of ancient witchcraft, summons the Weïrd Sisters to express her dissatisfaction. She believes that her contribution to Macbeth's downfall has been overlooked and desires to take an active role in ensuring his ultimate ruin. Indeed, she vows to spend the night crafting a deadly outcome for him ("this night I'll spend / Unto a dismal, and a fatal end"; 3.5.20-1). Hecate is planning to exploit Macbeth's overconfidence ("security / Is mortals' chiefest enemy"; 3.5.32-3) by using magical illusions to deceive him: "And that distilled by magic sleights / Shall raise such artificial sprites, / As by the strength of their illusion / Shall draw him on to his confusion" (3.5.26-9). The expression "draw him on" implies that these "artificial sprites" will entice Macbeth further into his own "confusion" and downfall. These lines reflect the themes of deception, manipulation, and the dangers of

[10] Kranz, p.371.
[11] Muir, p.xxxvi.
[12] Kranz, p.372.

unchecked ambition that are central to the play. In regard to the fifth scene of Act 3 and to the first scene of Act 4 (39-43, 140-7), many editors deem them "spurious".[13] Nicholas Brooke believes that "this could quite easily be the result of a late decision to alter this part of the play, chiefly no doubt to introduce Hecate".[14] Whereas it may seem unnecessary to the overall understanding of the play, Hecate's role is seen as integral to the play's unfolding, driving its operative progression to be "rather spectacular than narrative". Moreover, her reproach to the Weïrd Sisters "serves to establish her as the initiator of the apparitions in [Act 4 Scene 1]":[15]

HECATE O well done: I commend your pains,
And everyone shall share i'th' gains –
And now about the cauldron sing
Like elves and fairies in a ring,
Enchanting all that you put in. (4.1.39-43)

I deem this passage particularly intriguing as it highlights Hecate's anger directed towards the Weïrd Sisters for acting independently without her counsel. While the goddess of the underworld is reprimanding of her minions, her lines are delivered with such theatricality that they inevitably enhance the dramatic nature of her character.

Having introduced two figures – the Weïrd Sisters counting as one – who are wicked in their essence as they are involved with the unnatural world, I will now introduce two characters who represent (although they do not fulfil) the idea of the saintly Virgin Mary and thus of the good wife and woman, that is Lady Macduff and the Gentlewoman.

Despite Lady Macbeth being offered as a "type of universal female evil", Brooke does not believe that "her opposite in the play is woman as perfect image": indeed, "the brief cameo of Lady Macduff is actively spirited and, goaded by her child, she exhibits a refreshing independence; she is certainly not an icon on a pedestal".[16] Unlike Lady

[13] Muir, p.xxv.
[14] Brooke, p.52.
[15] Brooke, p.53.
[16] Brooke, pp.77-8.

Macbeth, Lady Macduff does not seek power or manipulation but instead maintains a stable and domestic role. Her loyalty to her family is evident when she expresses her disbelief at her husband's decision to flee, questioning his commitment as a husband and father: "Wisdom? To leave his wife, to leave his babes, […] / From whence himself does fly? He loves us not, / He wants the natural touch" (4.2.6-9). We are presented yet with another debate on manhood: Lady Macduff wonders whether a man who sacrifices the safety of his family for the good of his country is a real man. Left alone with her son, Lady Macduff expresses her anguish over her husband's betrayal and abandonment of their family and her apprehension for their safety ("Fathered he is, and yet he's fatherless"; 4.2.27). Nevertheless, once the Murderers hired by Macbeth invade their household and interrogate Lady Macduff on her husband's whereabouts, she hopes he is "in no place so unsanctified / Where such as thou mayst find him" (4.2.83-4). The vulnerability of the young and their profound need for protection is strikingly evident in this scene. It gives new life to the play's recurring motifs of infants, nourishment, and care, as well as references to birds, eggs, and nests ("For the poor wren, / The most diminutive of birds, will fight, / Her young ones in her nest, against the owl"; 4.2.9-11), which collectively represent a distinct concept of natural connection that Macbeth disrupts, consequently leading to his downfall.[17] Lady Macduff has the bitter knowledge that her perilous situation may have no other cause than simply existing in "this earthly world".

MESSENGER Bless you fair dame: I am not to you known,
Though in your state of honour I am perfect;
I doubt some danger does approach you nearly.
If you will take a homely man's advice,
Be not found here: hence with your little ones;
To fright you thus methinks I am too savage:
To do worse to you were fell cruelty,
Which is too nigh your person. Heaven preserve you,
I dare abide no longer.

[17] Ann Blake, "Children and Suffering in Shakespeare's Plays", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 23 (1993), p.297.

LADY MACDUFF Whither should I fly?
I have done no harm. But I remember now
I am in this earthly world, where to do harm
Is often laudable, to do good sometime
Accounted dangerous folly. (4.2.67-79)

I deem this scene to be extremely delicate and heartbreaking. Right before the Messenger's speech to Lady Macduff, the woman was discussing with her son about what distinguishes honest men from traitors (4.2.47-60); in response, her son regards "the liars and swearers" as fools "for there are / liars and swearers enough to beat the honest men, and / hang them up" (4.2.58-60). I have found no source regarding the Messenger, especially concerning his provenance. I wonder whether he was sent by someone who cared deeply for Lady Macduff and her children, maybe a kind neighbour who saw the Murderers coming and decided to send a servant to warn the Lady. Maybe, it was someone close to Macbeth who did not share the King's views and decided to act against it by warning Lady Macduff minutes before the Murderers' arrival. This makes me also question whether Lady Macduff would have been quick enough to flee with her children, as she only had little time to voice her preoccupation before the Murderers entered the chamber. Another option could be that the Messenger acted on his own: he saw the men coming from afar and rushed to Lady Macduff's household to warn her. Although this question remains unanswered, from the text we gather that the Messenger is a good man who, aware of the Lady's honourable position, would never do anything to harm her. Lady Macduff does not have a chance to respond to the "homely man" as he flees immediately out of fear. I would argue that in this scene Lady Macduff displays a sense of realism similar to that of her husband: she finds herself in a perilous situation simply because she is a woman, despite having "done no harm". Then, she wonders: "Why then, alas, / Do I put up that womanly defence, / To say I have done no harm?" (4.2.79-81). I find these lines slightly ironic as Lady Macduff understands that she lives that in a world where innocents are harmed solely because of their vulnerability, and thus her "womanly defence" holds very little importance. Almost as if Shakespeare wanted to emphasise the

uselessness of Lady Macduff's arguments, immediately after her speech enter the Murderers who will carry out Macbeth's orders and kill Macduff's family. Ann Blake observes that Macbeth's slaughter of Macduff's "pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop" (4.3.218-9) can be seen "as the most simply hateful image of that warfare on humanity, including his own, which he wages all through the play, with such grim success".[18]

Finally, Lady Macbeth's Gentlewoman represents a more compassionate and empathetic form of femininity, in contrast to the assertive and ambitious femininity embodied by Lady Macbeth earlier in the play. Despite being deemed a minor character, the Gentlewoman plays a pivotal role in providing an insight into Lady Macbeth's deteriorating mental condition. In Act 5 Scene 1, the Gentlewoman converses with the Doctor of Physics regarding Lady Macbeth's recent unusual behaviour. She expresses deep concern because she has overheard Lady Macbeth making statements that essentially amount to an admission of the Macbeths' wrongdoing. However, she has no intention to share what she has heard, even when the Doctor inquires and delves further into the matter ("That, sir, which I will not report after her"; 5.1.14, "Neither to you, nor to anyone, having no witness to confirm my speech"; 5.1.16-7). Her character is marked by loyalty and compassion as she is genuinely concerned with the Queen's well-being. While Lady Macbeth was initially portrayed as a powerful and ambitious woman who rejected these traditional roles, her descent into madness has brought her into a more vulnerable and dependent position. Hence, I think the Gentlewoman's role in caring for her reflects a more nurturing aspect of femininity. Her loyalty can be seen also in her understanding that sharing or spreading what she has heard could be viewed as treason, punishable by death. Given that there were no other witnesses present to corroborate any

[18] Blake, p.297.

accusations she might make, it would essentially be her word against the Queen's. This situation likely instils a degree of fear in the Gentlewoman, as she possesses knowledge of Macbeth's involvement in the murders of Duncan, Banquo, and the Macduff household. Banquo's demise resulted partly from his suspicions regarding Macbeth's role in Duncan's death. Therefore, it is reasonable for the Gentlewoman to fear for her own life due to her knowledge. Moreover, the Gentlewoman confides to the Doctor that she believes Lady Macbeth's descent into madness to be a consequence of overwhelming guilt. By uttering words such as "I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body" (5.1.52-3), the Gentlewoman means that she would not want to carry the immense burden of guilt that Lady Macbeth bears, even if it meant being the Queen of Scotland.

3.2 Lady Macbeth and the destructive power of guilt of conscience

As anticipated in the introduction to the third chapter, this section will focus exclusively on the figure of Lady Macbeth. I will explore her character from the beginning of the play until the end, paying close attention to the changes she undergoes and the causes of such changes.

The first apparition of Lady Macbeth on stage is during Act 1, Scene 5, when she reads her husband's letter in complete solitude. In the letter, Macbeth advises his "dearest partner of greatness" (1.5.10) to take his secret and "lay it to [her] heart" (1.5.12-3). Shakespeare often allows his characters to express their thoughts and emotions through monologues or asides, and this can be seen in Lady Macbeth's monologue I will comment on in a few lines. McGuinness believes that this is because the monologue in Shakespeare "serves many functions and can take as many forms, but it is always in its implementation

the mind trying to make sense of itself".[19] We are privy to her innermost thoughts, which are filled with the imagery of death and destruction. When she speaks of her "fell purpose" (1.5.45), her intentions are described in the most grotesque and frightening terms.

LADY MACBETH […] 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 murd'ring ministers,
Wherever, in your sightless substances,
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, 'Hold. hold'. (1.5.39-53)

We can immediately recognise the most grotesque image, that of her femininity being sold to "murd'ring ministers" and having her breastmilk exchanged for gall. We are not presented with a nurturing and positive image of motherhood as we sense Lady Macbeth's desire to kill her infant with her poisonous milk. Drawing back to the humoral theory I introduced both in my first and second chapter, women were allegedly cold and moist. However, it was not uncommon for women to turn to masculine models and thus to be defined by their cold and dry nature. These women, who were extremely close to the nature and appearance of men, were called *viragines*. Vittor Trincavelli, an Italian physician, described *viragines* as women who "do not menstruate, or have a very low flow without any consequence because in them the heat is almost as strong as in males".[20] However, this is not entirely true, as "the retention of menstrual blood can lead to the formation of harmful vapours rising from the uterus to the brain", namely "maniacal *delirium*".[21] This is precisely what happens to Lady Macbeth or, rather, what she wishes:

[19] McGuinness, p.74.
[20] Vittor Trincavelli, quoted in Rinaldi, forthcoming.
[21] Rinaldi, forthcoming.

she commands the spirits to fill her with so much "direst cruelty" that the access to remorse is stopped. It is important to stress the fact that Lady Macbeth is an extremely ambitious person, but her ambition is directed towards her husband: she is bargaining her femininity in exchange for her temper to be stronger with the aim of guiding Macbeth towards his goals. I would argue that, despite the negative consequences for both characters, Lady Macbeth's love for her husband is evident and her ambition rather admirable. Nonetheless, I believe that there could have been a more morally acceptable path to pursue in order for Lady Macbeth to achieve her goals.

Lady Macbeth's first soliloquy proves only that she believed that "Macbeth's conscience or conventionality was liable to prevent him from achieving the Crown by foul means, even though he may have proposed the murder when the question was merely theoretical".[22] Indeed, Lady Macbeth accuses her husband of "having proposed the murder to her before Duncan announced his intention of visiting Inverness, before time and place cohered".[23] Shakespeare is creating a strong verbal bond between husband and wife that will continue throughout the play by having Lady Macbeth utter the following lines:

> LADY MACBETH […]. Hie thee hither,
> That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
> And chastise with the valour of my tongue
> All that impedes thee from the golden round,
> Which Fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
> To have thee crowned withal. (1.5.24-9)

Like the Weïrd Sisters, Lady Macbeth is a temptress who exploits Macbeth's masculine frailties, eventually leading him to his downfall. Wilson Knight claims that Lady Macbeth "wins largely by appealing to Macbeth's 'valour'":[24] it is clear that Macbeth would have

[22] Muir, p.lv.
[23] Muir, p.liv.
[24] Wilson Knight, quoted in Muir, p.l.

never overcome his reluctance to commit murder "without the chastisement of his wife's tongue".[25]

Lady Macbeth is so masculine she claims that "she would dash her baby's brains out as it sucked on her breasts, […] unfathering herself as such as she is unmothering herself, the fame of unsexing now taking fabulous shape".[26] However, Carolyn Asp finds it obvious that the gall in Lady Macbeth's breasts has not been sufficient to unsex her. Indeed, "she admits that she has relied on wine to make her bold and give her fire, qualities normally associated with the masculine temperament":[27] "That which hath made them drunk, hath made me bold; / What hath quenched them, hath given me fire" (2.2.1-2). It is important to notice that Lady Macbeth's assumption of a masculine role distances her from her husband rather than drawing them closer: Lady Macbeth believes that by becoming unfeminized and by making Macbeth "manly" she will enforce their love and partnership; on the contrary, Macbeth will think of her as "subordinate and unworthy of truly sharing power".[28] On this topic I already mentioned that, after Lady Macbeth's active involvement in the plotting of Duncan's murder, Macbeth will no longer inform her of his plans or ask her any kind of advice. The only other scene where she is regarded with some respect is during the banquet scene in Act 3, when Macbeth abandons himself to a fit of a "strange infirmity" (3.4.87) and his wife is the only person capable to partially restore his sanity. William T. Liston regards *Macbeth* as Shakespeare's most explicit play in demarcating man from woman: when men and women "step outside these sex and gender roles, they lose their humanity". It is their liberation from definition that destroys them: Lady Macbeth's endeavour to infiltrate the realm typically reserved for males leads

[25] Muir, p.lxvii.
[26] McGuinness, p.73.
[27] Carolyn Asp, ""Be bloody, bold and resolute": Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in *Macbeth*", *Studies in Philology*, 78, 2 (1981), p.161.
[28] Asp, p.162.

her to be imprisoned "within her own sick mind".[29] I will expand further on this image of Lady Macbeth's "sick mind" towards the end of the chapter, but now I think it is important to delve into what I deem are the two main events that gradually led Lady Macbeth to madness.

One question has remained unanswered, of whether Lady Macbeth has produced an heir to perpetuate Macbeth's lineage. While in the first act of the play the child's presence is rather palpable ("I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me"; 1.7.54-5, "I would […] / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out"; 1.7.56-8), immediately after Macbeth wishes that his wife would "bring forth men-children only" (1.7.73). These are the last mentions of their baby, until Macduff's cried line: "He has no children" (4.3.216). Many scholars have debated this subject, and although a variety of viewpoints exists, it is important to acknowledge that any specific information would be based on conjecture since the play itself leaves many questions unanswered. Brooke observes that "it is impenetrably ambiguous whether she means it, let alone whether it is true or not", yet as "an imaginative fact that babe is certainly very vivid to us in ways that are no part of Lady Macbeth's consciousness".[30]

Sally Fisher claims that while Shakespeare "never reveals the details of Lady Macbeth's motherhood, his allusions suggest a knowledge of the historical Lady Macbeth's maternity".[31] Fisher explains how Gruoch, the eleventh-century Scottish queen I will introduce in a few lines, serves as the foundational figure "upon whom Holinshed's *Chronicles*' wife of Macbeth and Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth is based".

[29] William T. Liston, "'Male and Female Created He Them': Sex and Gender in 'Macbeth'", *College Literature,* 16, 3 (1989), pp.232-3.
[30] Brooke, p.14.
[31] Sally Fisher, "'To Beare the Name of a Quéene': Eleanor, Duchess of Gloucester and Lady Macbeth: Queenship and Motherhood". In Finn, Kavita and Schutte, Valerie (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Shakespeare's Queens. Queenship and Power*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p.116.

Gruoch was the queen consort of Mac Bethad, king of Alba, Scotland. Daughter of the Scottish prince Boite mac Cináeda, Gruoch married Gille Coemgáin mac Maíl Brigti, Mormaer of Moray, from whom she had at least one child, Lulach. After her husband passed away, Gruoch married Gille's cousin, Mac Bethad; however, their marriage remained childless.[32] Shakespeare expands upon Gruoch's figure to create Lady Macbeth, a character who dramatically alters her identity. Furthermore, Fisher notes that Shakespeare does not reveal that Lady Macbeth's child was "not from her marriage with Macbeth, an omission that sets up a situation where Lady Macbeth can justifiably pursue kingship for her husband and queenship for herself".[33] Marvin Rosenberg shares Fisher's view when saying that "Lady Macbeth has at least one child: […] history may insist that the child was not sired by Macbeth". I posit that Macbeth assumes the role of his wife's child, and this is evident mainly in the first acts of the play, when Lady Macbeth reassures and persuades her husband to commit the infamous deed which will irrevocably make him lose his innocence. It appears to me that Lady Macbeth desires to render Macbeth "a man-child, full of reckless purpose and daring, but void of fear and remorse, void of the superego". In order to do this, Lady Macbeth "replaces the image of a son killing an aging father with the image of a mother killing an infant son".[34]Although Lady Macbeth's attempt is successful at first, the version of Macbeth she creates eventually undergoes a transformation, evolving into two contrasting identities. On one side, there is a man consumed by fear and haunted by the loss of his innocence; on the other side, there emerges a ruthless and self-serving monster.

The second cause I find determining in Lady Macbeth's descent into madness is her amenorrhea, that is a defect or the absence of a menstrual cycle in a woman who has

[32] Fisher, p.114.
[33] Fisher, p.116.
[34] Marina Favila, "'Mortal Thoughts' and Magical Thinking in 'Macbeth'", *Modern Philology*, 99, 1 (2001), p.11.

reached reproductive age. At the beginning of the second section of my third chapter I have mentioned once again the humoral theory and the *viragines*, women who "behave in a way traditionally associated with men" or women "regarded as having masculine strength or spirit".[35] However, the temperament of men and women is determined by the four humours on which Hippocrates and Gales founded their theory. The human body was believed to consist of blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Each element corresponds to the four temperaments: one could be sanguine (hot and moist), phlegmatic (cold and moist), choleric (hot and dry), and melancholic (cold and dry). *Viragines* were considered to be cold and dry, precisely because they possess both feminine and masculine characteristics, and thus they are of melancholic temperament. In the case of Lady Macbeth, I believe she can be defined a *virago* because by unsexing herself she has rendered herself somewhat masculine, and also because of her amenorrhea. This bilious excess can have enormous consequences, the first one being affected by melancholia. By definition, melancholia is due to "a juice produced by a corruption of the blood, an excess of bile or black bile burning".[36] Timothy Bright made a distinction between melancholia and guilt of conscience, which can happen when "the rational soul recognizes its sins against the divinely imprinted law of nature".[37] I believe that this is precisely the case of Lady Macbeth, who is affected both by melancholia and by guilt of conscience. She is affected by melancholia because she poisoned her blood with gall, a term equivalent to bile. Lady Macbeth is also affected by guilt of conscience, and it is shown by her somnambulism, which is essentially "the reaction of the mind to a suppressed painful experience".[38] Physicians pointed out that a "man's properly guilty conscience, by disturbing his passions and humors, might render him genuinely melancholic in the

[35] "virago, n., sense 2.a", *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6199108501, accessed 20 October 2023.
[36] Rinaldi, forthcoming.
[37] Kocher, p.343.
[38] Isador H. Coriat, *The Hysteria of Lady Macbeth*, New York: Moffat, 1912, p.14.

medical sense".[39] Lady Macbeth's Doctor is aware of this as "unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (5.1.69-70). However, the Doctor also knows that everything derives from a spiritual state, and therefore "more needs she the divine than the physician" (5.1.72).

Borrowing from Maurice and Hanna Charney, "madness allows women an emotional intensity and scope not usually expected in conventional feminine roles": while madness in men is not inherently male, women's madness is often interpreted as something intrinsically feminine.[40] In their opinion, which I strongly align with, "no external sign of madness is more familiar and […] repeated than that of a woman with her hair down, virtually an emblem of feminine madness on the Elizabethan stage".[41] This moment is highly intimate, especially given the societal norms of the time. Women typically wore their hair up when in public to avoid being associated with loose or promiscuous behaviour. Given that Lady Macbeth is sleepwalking in this scene, it is probable that she was dressed in her nightgown, and her hair would have naturally fallen loosely over her shoulders. This choice of depicting her with her hair down could be symbolic of her vulnerability and inner turmoil in this private moment. While there is no doubt that Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* was the main source of the play, Muir believes that Shakespeare invented the sleep-walking scene and "the presumed suicide of Lady Macbeth" as "Holinshed says nothing about the fate of Macbeth's wife".[42] According to Muir, "it must be admitted that a second personality which speaks through the patient's mouth, confessing sins and sometimes relating memories, was thought to be a characteristic of demoniacal somnambulism". One may argue that all these phenomena can be rationalized without invoking the supernatural, and this observation might indicate

[39] Kocher, p.344.
[40] Maurice Charney, and Hanna Charney, "The Language of Madwomen in Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists", *Signs*, 3, 2 (1977), p.451.
[41] Charney and Charney, p.452.
[42] Muir, p.xlii.

a certain ambiguity in Shakespeare's thought process.[43] Nicholas Brooke claims that Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking is "essentially about delusion, but caused by psychological disturbance not by supernatural agency"; this is endorsed by the Doctor and the Gentlewoman, who "also recognize a connection with guilt dreams in its jumble of displaced memories".[44] Finally, Muir remarks that in the sleep-walking scene, "whether her involuntary confessions […] are the outpourings of her repressed conscience, or the treacherous words of the demon within her, we need not deny her pity".[45]

The first scene of the final Act sees the presence on stage of a Doctor of Physics and a Waiting Gentlewoman. The Waiting Gentlewoman, who has been attending to Lady Macbeth, confides her worries about Lady Macbeth's conditions to the Doctor.

GENTLEWOMAN Since his majesty went into the field, I
Have seen her rise from bed, throw her nightgown
Upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it
Write upon't, read it, afterwards seal it, and again
Return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep. (5.1.4-8)

Scholars made an insightful observation regarding Lady Macbeth's act of writing a letter to Macbeth: according to Kenneth Muir, this might indicate that "she still wishes to control him, though he no longer consults her". Alternatively, it could be interpreted as a form of confession.[46] Nicholas Brooke also grapples with a similar degree of uncertainty, contending that the nature of what Lady Macbeth writes and seals remains ambiguous – it could be a message to Macbeth, a confession, or even a will.[47]

DOCTOR Foul whisp'rings are abroad: unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets:
More needs she the divine than the physician –
God, God forgive us all. Look after her,
Remove from her the means of all annoyance,
And still keep eyes upon her. So good night,

[43] Muir, p.lxix.
[44] Brooke, p.5.
[45] Muir, p.lxix.
[46] Muir in Shakespeare, Act 5 Scene 1, note 6, p.142.
[47] Brooke in Shakespeare, Act 5 Scene 1, note 6, p-193.

My mind she has mated, and amazed my sight.
I think, but dare not speak. (5.1.69-77)

I read the Doctor's last five lines as if they were a prayer to God. As her disease pertains no longer to the realm of physics and medicine, it is as if the Doctor is delivering Lady Macbeth to God, the only entity capable of restoring her well-being. Alternatively, one could perceive the Doctor's "prayer" as if the Doctor is entrusting Lady Macbeth to the Gentlewoman, who is asked to look after and care for her until her last moments on Earth. Muir presents as synonyms of the word "annoyance" terms such as "injury, harm to herself". Furthermore, he explains that "annoy and annoyance" were used in "a stronger sense than at present": "this hint prepares us for Lady Macbeth's suicide".[48] Lady Macbeth's obsession with the "blood-stains on her hand, and particularly with the *smell* of the blood" might also symbolize "her consciousness of guilt and the outrage she has committed on her own soul".[49] According to Frank McGuinness, Malcolm's description of the late Lady of Inverness Castle ("[…] and his fiend-like Queen / Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands / Took off her life; 5.7.99-101) may cast uncertainties regarding the circumstances of her death, still "the suicidal woman" serves as "emblem of her marriage, proof of her and Macbeth's wasted lives, his dearest chuck reduced to nothing by the ruthless end of their mutual mind games".[50]

Scholars are still torn about whether Lady Macbeth actually committed suicide as the play itself does not offer much information if not speculations. I will now propose three hypotheses on her death, and a possible explanation for them. My first hypothesis is that Lady Macbeth committed this outrageous act "on her own soul" voluntarily: quite possibly, the immense sense of guilt that Lady Macbeth had to experience in utter solitude and her husband's disinterest in her figure were no longer bearable. A second guess could

[48] Muir in Shakespeare, Act 5 Scene 1, note 73, p.146.
[49] Muir, p.lxviii.
[50] McGuinness, p.78.

be an involuntary suicide: as her mental health gradually degenerated and her hysterical fits of somnambulism took over, it is possible that Lady Macbeth fell down the window. If we consider that they can experience many things can happen without any memory of them, it is not uncommon for sleepwalkers to injure themselves badly and die as a result. My third, wild guess is that Lady Macbeth could have been murdered by order of her husband, who was in the battlefield at that time. This would explain his cold stupor at the cry of women and his detached answer at the news of his wife's death. Again, I will propose three possible explanations for Macbeth's reaction. His cold answer could derive from the fact that he was the one who sent the assassins to kill his wife ("Out, out, brief candle, / Life's but a walking shadow"; 5.5.23-4), thus he was only waiting for confirmation. In his soliloquy on time ("Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow"; 5.5.19) we also see a man who is nothing but empty and cold, the "milk of kindness" he was once full of has now dried, leaving room to a man who is only concerned with his own achievements. Life is "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing" (5.5.26-8). Finally, my third hypothesis is that Macbeth knew that his wife "should have died hereafter" (5.5.17) immediately after his conversation with the Doctor, who then revealed to him that Lady Macbeth was "troubled with thick-coming fancies / That keep her from her rest" (5.3.37-8). I believe that Macbeth sensed that he too was going to die, even though the witches' prophecy was still providing him a sort of comfort.

In conclusion, I would argue that the final scene of the play is the only moment when Macbeth acts like a proper man: still in disbelief, he takes responsibility and fights like the valiant soldier we were presented with at the beginning of the play. Macduff has killed the "most disloyal traitor, / The Thane of Cawdor" (1.2.52-3) and now Scotland can flourish again under Malcolm's rule ("Hail, King of Scotland." *[Flourish]*; 5.7.89). Once again, it is important to notice how this epithet was used in regard to the former

Thane of Cawdor, whom Macbeth has succeeded, and nevertheless is extremely fitting to Macbeth, foreshadowing Macbeth's treason since the beginning of the play.

SUMMARY

Questo elaborato nasce con l'obiettivo di analizzare il personaggio di Lady Macbeth, moglie del Barone di Glamis nell'opera teatrale *Macbeth* di William Shakespeare. Poiché si tratta di un personaggio che racchiude in sé sia caratteristiche femminili che maschili, questo studio verte sui concetti di *female hysteria* e *patriarchal dominance* e di come essi si intrecciano e traducono nella figura di Lady Macbeth.

Il primo capitolo si propone di fornire un quadro generale della società inglese del sedicesimo secolo, con particolare attenzione al periodo storico in cui William Shakespeare visse. Molti studiosi ritengono che l'opera, composta tra il 1603 e il 1606, sia stata dedicata al sovrano Giacomo VI di Scozia e I d'Inghilterra, erede della regina Elisabetta I, per celebrare la sua ascesa al trono e la sua casata. Giacomo I era noto per essere affascinato dalla magia e dalla necromanzia, come testimoniato dalla sua *Daemonologie*. In quest'opera, Giacomo I definì le donne come il sesso debole, per cui più predisposte alle malattie e alle possessioni demoniache rispetto agli uomini. Sono state quindi definite due categorie di *disordely women*, ovvero donne che sfuggivano al controllo della società patriarcale dell'epoca: le *bewitched* e le *hysterics*. Secondo la studiosa Joanna Levin e alcuni suoi colleghi, il personaggio di Lady Macbeth si colloca in entrambe le categorie, mostrando una trasformazione da strega a isterica. Nella sua prima apparizione, Lady Macbeth evoca spiriti maligni per privarsi della sua femminilità e, di conseguenza, della sua capacità di essere madre. Nella sua ultima apparizione, la regina di Scozia viene mostrata mentre è presa da un atto di sonnambulismo e tenta di lavare il sangue del re Duncan dalle sue mani.

Il primo capitolo, inoltre, introduce brevemente la tragedia, prestando attenzione alle fonti che il drammaturgo ha preso in considerazione per la stesura della sua opera. Fonte principale riconosciuta dagli studiosi è, senz'ombra di dubbio, le *Chronicles* di Raphael Holinshed. Ciononostante, numerose alterazioni sono state apportate a partire dai personaggi stessi: mentre Holinshed presenta il re Duncan come un re giovane e privo di esperienza, Shakespeare lo rende anziano e saggio. Poiché il sovrano Giacomo I si considerava erede del virtuoso Banquo, Shakespeare non lo ha ritratto come complice di Macbeth nell'assassinio di Duncan; invece, ha creato il personaggio di Banquo come un costante richiamo per Macbeth ai suoi fallimenti e alle sue azioni immorali.

Il secondo capitolo si concentra invece sui personaggi maschili presenti nell'opera e ne distingue i tratti principali, a partire da Macbeth stesso. Macbeth è un uomo con un'ambizione vasta ma incerta, spinto dalla moglie a commettere l'omicidio del re Duncan per realizzare la profezia delle streghe. Nonostante la sua insicurezza e la paura di perdere la sua innocenza, Macbeth si convince di essere invincibile in seguito alla sua incoronazione come re di Scozia a Scone. Spaventato dall'incertezza del suo regno sterile, vede nel suo compagno d'armi Banquo un rivale, che decide di eliminare. Tuttavia, il suo assassinio non fa che turbare il suo animo. La Scozia, trasformatasi in un luogo immorale in cui i cavalli si mangiano a vicenda, è sotto il giogo del tiranno Macbeth. Il Barone di Fife, Macduff, si propone di riportare la Scozia al suo antico splendore chiedendo l'aiuto di Malcolm, erede legittimo al trono. Macduff è l'emblema della mascolinità, che in lui si realizza a pieno: non ha paura di mostrarsi fragile davanti ai suoi compagni ed è disposto a dare la vita per la sua patria. Sarà lui a infliggere il colpo mortale a Macbeth, rendendo possibile l'ascesa al trono di Malcolm e la speranza di un futuro migliore.

Il terzo capitolo, sullo stampo del secondo, si concentra sui personaggi femminili, distinguendone sempre i tratti caratteristici. Particolare attenzione è stata rivolta alle

Sorelle Fatali, le misteriose *Weïrd Sisters*. Si tratta di personaggi molto complessi che hanno suscitato perplessità sia tra gli intellettuali che tra i personaggi stessi. Ad esempio, Banquo, durante il loro primo incontro, ha difficoltà a distinguere se si tratti di donne o uomini, considerando la presenza di barba sui loro volti. Sebbene le streghe shakespeariane abbiano giocato un ruolo fondamentale nell'influenzare il corso degli eventi, è importante sottolineare che il protagonista è pienamente consapevole delle proprie azioni. Pertanto, la responsabilità delle sue azioni ricade unicamente su di lui. Dopo una breve introduzione circa il personaggio di Ecate, antica divinità greca, e della dama di compagnia di Lady Macbeth, l'elaborato prosegue presentando il personaggio di Lady Macduff, una donna estremamente diversa da quelle incontrate finora. Madre attenta ai bisogni dei figli, Lady Macduff è anche una donna che inizia a dubitare dell'affetto del marito nei loro confronti dopo la sua partenza per l'Inghilterra per incontrare Malcolm. Tuttavia, lei adempie al suo ruolo di donna e moglie fedele fino al suo ultimo respiro. Questo avviene quando gli uomini di Macbeth irrompono nella sua casa per uccidere il marito, ormai considerato traditore agli occhi del sovrano. Rifiutandosi di svelare il piano di Macduff, muore dopo aver assistito alla tragica morte del suo bambino.

La seconda sezione del terzo capitolo, infine, si propone di analizzare in dettaglio la figura di Lady Macbeth e alcune delle cause che hanno portato la sua salute mentale a degenerare rapidamente. La prima causa individuata è la mancanza di prole, condizione che ha reso sterile il regno di Macbeth e fragile la sua permanenza al trono. Dotati entrambi di un'ambizione senza precedenti, i due coniugi si ritrovano a fare i conti con i sensi di colpa derivanti dall'assassinio del sovrano, il saggio Duncan. Inizialmente, Lady Macbeth crede che un po' di acqua possa cancellare il peccato, ma col passare del tempo questi sentimenti diventano sempre più opprimenti e ingestibili. Tuttavia, si rivelano tali solo per Lady Macbeth poiché il marito, l'ormai sovrano di Scozia, sembra non esserne

scalfito. Nel tentativo di rendere più sicura la sua permanenza al trono, Macbeth ingaggia degli assassini per uccidere Banquo, il suo fidato compagno, e il figlio, Fleance. Per placare la sua paranoia, assolda altri uomini per uccidere la moglie del Barone di Fife, Lady Macduff, e i suoi figli. Lady Macbeth è informata del primo omicidio solo a ordine dato, mentre del secondo è ignara. Altra causa è, appunto, il suo essere stata declassata da fidata confidente e compagna a una semplice moglie, a cui non era necessario fornire alcun tipo di informazione. Ulteriore causa individuata è l'amenorrea, ovvero la mancanza del ciclo mestruale che, per la teoria umorale dell'epoca, attribuisce alla donna un temperamento melancolico. Il graduale declino della sua salute mentale è evidente nella famosa scena prima del quinto atto, quando Lady Macbeth è sorpresa in un atto di sonnambulismo dal Dottore e dalla dama di compagnia. La sua ultima comparsa è nella scena settima dello stesso atto, poco prima del duello tra Macduff e Macbeth, che risulterà fatale per quest'ultimo, quando gli giunge notizia della morte di Lady Macbeth.

Benché l'opera in sé non dia molte informazioni a riguardo, molti studiosi ipotizzano si tratti di un suicidio. Mia premura è stata quella di proporre tre possibili ipotesi circa la morte della regina di Scozia: la prima ipotesi è quella di un suicidio volontario dettato dal senso di colpa divenuto insopportabile, la seconda è quella di un suicidio involontario poiché in preda al sonnambulismo potrebbe aver perso controllo di sé. La terza ipotesi vede un coinvolgimento di Macbeth, il quale potrebbe aver ordinato ai suoi uomini di uccidere la donna. Questo, a mio avviso, spiegherebbe la reazione fredda e distaccata di Macbeth alla notizia del decesso della sua amata. A riguardo, ho proposto ancora una volta tre possibili motivazioni circa questa reazione. In conclusione, possiamo dire con sufficiente grado di certezza che il dramma shakespeariano si presti alle più disparate congetture poiché, benché abbia una conclusione ben precisa, molti finali restano aperti. Parte della grandezza di questa tragedia sta nel lasciare spazio a diverse interpretazioni.

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