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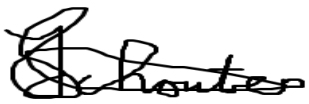

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Gendering ‘‘The Scottish Play’’: Ideas on Gender Roles, Masculinity and Femininity of the Elizabethan Era and the Reign of James I Depicted in William Shakespeare’s ‘‘Macbeth’’

BA thesis

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Abstract

This thesis concerns the play ‘‘Macbeth’’ by William Shakespeare, and focuses on depictions of gender, masculinity and femininity as seen in the characters of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters. The purpose of this thesis is to determine if and how these depictions correspond to ideas about gender and masculinity/femininity popular during the time in which the play was written, i.e. the Elizabethan era and the reign of James I. The resulting research question is as follows: Focusing on the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters in particular, how can we interpret ideas of gender roles and masculinity/femininity popular during the Elizabethan era and the early Stuart period? *The England of Elizabeth: The Structure of Society* by A.L. Rowse, Bruce W. Young’s *Family Life in the Age of Shakespeare*, and Barry Coward’s *The Stuart Age* will provide the reader with a historical background of Shakespeare’s play. The play will be subjected to a close reading, and analysed with the help of several essays and books, including Stephanie Chamberlain’s ‘‘Fantasizing Infanticide’’. One important conclusion is that although the general consensus in Elizabethan/Stuart times was that men were superior to women, the reality was much more complex. Although a majority of women were disadvantaged, many exerted power in various other ways. In the play, this is reflected in the relationship between Macbeth and his wife, who take on each other’s gender roles and challenge them. These roles are also challenged by the characters of the Weird Sisters, who defy and subvert female gender roles, creating their own kind of femininity.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, ‘‘Macbeth,’’ gender roles, masculinity, femininity, Elizabeth, James I, witchcraft

Table of contents

Introduction

Before WWII, men were historically the writers of history, and men's writing was legitimized far more often than women's. In the 1960s/70s, interest in gender and gender roles sparked among academia. The focus was especially on women writers as well as women literary characters, and about trying to re-establish and re-evaluate women's role in (literary) history (Hudson 21).

As a consequence, it was also during that period that interest in gender-based readings of Shakespeare's work developed. Gender, gender roles and their depictions in his plays have been subjects of academic research in Shakespearean studies. Examples of feminist works on the subject are Carolyne Lenz's *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (1980), and Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975), among numerous other articles discussing the role of women in Shakespeare's plays. Especially the latter work established interest in gender analyses of Shakespeare. Academics might be misled by its title, which suggests that its focus is primarily on women, but Dusinberre also makes comparisons to the men in the plays; although she claims that the plays of 1590 to 1625 are ''feminist in sympathy'' (qtd. in Smith 143), alluding to the changing attitude towards women to be seen in contemporaneous society, it is easy to historicize Shakespeare's plays in terms of ''Puritan ideas on spiritual equality between men and women, the presence of Queen Elizabeth I on the throne, and humanist ideas about education'' (Kemp 172). Moreover, Dusinberre holds that William Shakespeare did not necessarily make a strong distinction between the feminine and the masculine, implicitly doing away with the binary division of gender roles. In many ways, including physically, intellectually and spiritually, the world of men and women could not be separated.

This work paved the way for more research on the role of gender patterns in Shakespeare's works, and it was the first analytical work of many to come. Dusinberre related Shakespeare's works primarily to contemporaneous notions of feminism, which indicates that her study is very much a product of her time. She herself has acknowledged that were she to (re)write it now, she would also have to take into account ''the relation of history to the play as fiction'' (qtd. in Smith 143). As this aspect is relatively unexplored yet, this last point is exactly what I want to address and discuss in this thesis. I will look at one play by Shakespeare in particular, ''Macbeth'', and analyse it in terms of depicted gender roles, placing it in its historical context.

A.L. Rowse's *The England of Elizabeth: The Structure of Society*, and Robin Well's *Shakespeare on Masculinity* are examples of works in this field of research. *The England of Elizabeth* focuses on societal structures and relations in Elizabethan England, also giving an account of contemporaneous ideas of gender and masculinity/femininity. The latter work is a study on the depiction of masculinity in Shakespeare's plays, which consists of several essays about some of the most popular plays, including one about ''Macbeth''. John Drakakis's *Macbeth: A Critical Reader* gives a general reading of the play. An example of an article with a more narrowed-down topic is ''Fantasizing Infanticide'' by Stephanie Chamberlain, which focuses on Lady Macbeth's role as a mother who also displays masculine traits.

A survey of scholarly research on this topics leads to the conclusion that what it lacks so far is a comparison of men and women in Shakespeare's plays, in terms of assigned gender roles, their interaction, and the way they are performed. This is the focus of this thesis. Specifically, this thesis will look at how masculinity and femininity are played out in ''Macbeth'', by drawing a comparison between two of its main characters, and three secondary characters. The two main

characters of interest are Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, and the three secondary characters are the witches, i.e. the Weird Sisters. This thesis will give an interpretation of these characters' behaviour when it comes to gender performance, set against the period in which the play was written, i.e. the Elizabethan period and the reign of James Stuart. The research question will be as follows: Focusing on the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters in particular, how can we interpret ideas of gender roles and masculinity/femininity popular during the Elizabethan era and the early Stuart period? Further subquestions that have to be considered in order to accurately make a historical gender analysis are: What was the historical and societal context in which Shakespeare wrote his literature? How were contemporaneous ideas of masculinity/femininity in general constructed in the Elizabethan era? How are these ideas reflected in the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and how do these characters compare in terms of gender roles and masculinity/femininity? This research is relevant, because it will allow in-depth research into Shakespeare's plays and their relationship with Elizabethan and Stuart culture; how they are a reflection of it, and in which ways they went against it. It will give us a clearer understanding as a whole of how culture and literature interact.

The basis for my framework will be A.L. Rowse's work *The England of Elizabeth: The Structure of Society*, which is an extensive work of research that focuses entirely on societal structures and norms during Elizabeth I's reign, Bruce W. Young's *Family Life in the Age of Shakespeare*, and Barry Coward's *The Stuart Age*. Rowse's, Young's and Coward's findings to ''Macbeth'' will be analysed and be compared to each other. Another work that will be considered in the research is *The Queen's Mercy: Gender and Judgment in Representations of Elizabeth* by Mary Villeponteaux. This work focuses specifically on the supposedly 'female' quality of mercy, and how the concept was both supported and undermined in real life. This

work is useful in the gender analysis of Lady Macbeth in particular.

Consequently, the structure of my thesis is as follows. Chapter 1 will be devoted to an overview of government and class structures in the Elizabethan era, and a general overview of Elizabethan constructions of gender. Chapter 2 will consist of an analysis of the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, focusing on gender and power relations. In Chapter 3, the last chapter of this thesis, a similar analysis will be applied to the Weird Sisters. The conclusion will include a summary of the findings, and the research conclusions.

Chapter 1 – The play's historical, social and cultural background

To understand the way in which Shakespeare plays with gender and power relations in his play ''Macbeth'', it is important to cast a brief look at the dynasty before the Tudors, the Plantagenets. While Elizabeth was born well into the Tudor dynasty (she was its fifth monarch to rule), we cannot deny the Plantagenet influence in her time. The Plantagenets may have turned out to be less well-known than other dynasties in English history, but their dynasty was relatively long and left a permanent mark on England, establishing what 'Englishness' was for many centuries to come. We will see this reflected in the analysis of the play.

The Plantagenets

The Plantagenet dynasty ruled England for most of the thirteenth and fourteenth century. However, its success was not without obstacles – as succession in that time happened from brother to brother as often as from father to son, for a long time, the rule of its first king, Henry III, was insecure and often challenged. There was a realistic chance that Henry would be supplanted by other claimants to the throne (Hamilton 224). Nonetheless, after some time this tension was resolved, and the Plantagenets sat firmly on the throne, until Richard II failed to produce a male heir, effectively putting the dynasty he originated from to an end (225).

Nevertheless, the Plantagenets did lay the basis for England, and shaped it to the country we know now. This was because it was the first truly 'English' dynasty, despite the fact that many English kings had imperial aspirations:

> If Henry [III] still thought of himself as French in cultural terms, nonetheless the resources available to him, both economic and human, were derived from his English

holdings. (225)

Edward II also clung on to his vision of English hegemony in the British Isles, and Edward III saw a strong development of an English identity (226). Another reason the Plantagenets had such a profound impact on English history was the development of parliament in government. A parliament was first called for in the second half of the thirteenth century. By its end and the start of the fourteenth century, the parliament had become a court of law, a legislative body, and the single legitimate source of grants of taxation. By the fifteenth century, it could not be separated from governance of England, and had become part of English legacy (226).

The Elizabethan era

The last section focused on Plantagenet England and its historical influence (upon the country itself, but also upon the rest of the world). This section will concern the succeeding Elizabethan era. Because ‘‘Macbeth’’ was published only a few years into James’ reign, traces of Elizabethan times were still there, and this justifies an Elizabethan focus on the play. Still, we cannot ignore the fact that it was written in the early Stuart period and therefore must be taken into account in the analysis, which I will do later on in this chapter.

A.L. Rowse points out that Elizabethan England is still very much tangible in our times, and had a deep impact on the rest of history (19). Rowse names William Shakespeare as the most important literary phenomenon of the Elizabethan era, and one that has maintained its popularity throughout the centuries. This is because Shakespeare’s literature focused on all aspects of society:

No other dramatist has devoted a whole cycle of plays to the history of the country, not

> only as a kind of dramatic epic, but as a morality, reflecting profoundly upon the problems of order and authority […]. The real mystery is the explanation of the inexhaustible vitality and veracity of all that he wrote […]. (38)

Shakespeare's plays often showed doubts about power relations and gender patterns, like in ''Macbeth''. His work also reflects the historical age. Rowse says that the Elizabethan age can be divided into two distinct periods: there was a period full of insecurity and ''naïveté'' about the world, in which the English saw potential but were not aware how to use it, like ''a young animal not yet sure of its muscles or strength'' (39). The second period saw potential realized, with Renaissance discoveries in science, developments in religion and philosophical insights. This is reflected in the plays, which became richer in content and more reflective (40). As a play that was written right after the Elizabethan period ended, ''Macbeth'' probably belonged to the second period, which will help in the analysis of power relations in ''Macbeth''.

Power relations in Macbeth were almost inevitably based on those in real life, so it is important to focus on a more tangible aspect of Elizabethan society: its internal structure. During Tudor times, society was already very layered and just as diverse. All in all, six different ranks could be distinguished: the monarch was at the top, then came the nobility, the gentry, merchants, the yeomanry and ordinary workers. Elizabethans were very much aware of their position in the structure. Probably apart from this, there were the poor who did not fit in any class, and there were people that could fit in more than one rank because of their means and occupations. Contrary to what we might conclude from this rigid structure, however, there was also a lot of movement within, especially in the yeomanry and the gentry. The nobility was losing some of its prominence, and in the second half of the sixteenth century, many yeomen had

climbed from their class to the gentry, as a consequence of their investments in farms and parishes. As Rowse notes, the yeomanry were the most dynamic class in Tudor society, adapting quickly and creatively, so its own class was prospering too (255). The gentry thrived as well, and over time, it became harder to distinguish the two classes. For this reason, it makes sense to view the Tudor class structure not as a ladder, but as a kind of 'social tapestry'.

Moving on to issues of gender, Rowse implies that there was not necessarily one clear stance on the position of women. Rowse gives a general account of ideas about women in the Tudor era. In theory, women, no matter their class or rank, were not allowed to educate themselves. Nonetheless, there were exceptions to that rule, the most obvious one of which was Queen Elizabeth. The queen herself had proved herself to be very receptive to ideas and education in general (559). Yet, in the sixteenth century there was a consensus that people should be taught according to ''position and aptitude'' (559), and as Rowse points out, ''education did not leave the ground of common sense in these matters'' (560). Since women's place was decided to be in the home, essential subjects for them were ones like reading, writing, needlework, and housewifery; women simply had no use for other subjects, as they would never become lawyers, or doctors. In spite of this, the level of literacy among women in this century was much higher on average than in many others until the nineteenth century (560).

Bruce W. Young gives a more in-depth analysis of the cornerstone of Tudor society: the family. Young's analysis of the structure of the family will contribute to our understanding of how, in ''Macbeth'', power is distributed in the family. In Tudor times the term 'family' had two meanings: household and lineage. 'Cornerstone' is no exaggerated term, as the family had many different but essential roles to fulfil; it was like an organism in which each body part has a different function (29). Family could be political, but also part of the cosmos; there was the

individual level, the family level, the commonwealth level and the cosmic level, from which God ruled the universe. The head of the household was always the father, who was also the master of the servants (33). His role was seen as ‘‘natural’’, and God-given. Because nature was seen as subservient to God, family was capable of diverging from the norm, yet this could be excused by referring to the Fall in the Bible, which only made families imperfect. Family was one of God's (albeit imperfect) instruments in governing his creations (32).

As for women, Young claims that contemporary literature often expresses an unfavourable view of their opportunities and treatment in Tudor society, but this is mostly inaccurate. For example, women did have a choice in whom they married, so they were not, like Virginia Woolf claimed, ‘‘locked up, beaten and flung about the room, without any shock being inflicted on public opinion’’ (qtd. in Young 35). Contrary to what many believe, women were not usually married by the time they were fifteen years of age, but rather married about four or five years later. Men married at age 24 or 25 on average, which implies a greater amount of equality during marriage. Of course, forced and arranged marriages still took place, but they were a minority, and consent was expected from both parties involved (35-6).

There were also multiple, conflicting, views about equality between men and women. One held that men were the superior sex, yet another said that men and women were complementary, the ideal virtue being a combination of male and female characteristics. On the other end of the spectrum there was the view that not men, but women were superior, at least when it came to issues of morality. Lastly, there was the view that there was absolute equality between the sexes, sometimes focusing on the idea that Christ was neither sex, and that there will be no gender in the eternal world (42). Society also seemed conflicted on the issue of women's appearance in public: on the one hand, it was limited, but on the other the admiration for

Elizabeth as a ruler affected views about women's role in society: aristocratic women were patrons of the arts, letters and religion. Lower in the social structure, women – next to housewives – may be street vendors, dairy maids, midwives, schoolteachers and even writers (42).

Young acknowledges that women's legal stance was problematic, as through marriage, man and woman became legally one, embodied in the husband. In practice, though, women lacked many legal rights and responsibilities, but these were not completely absent; women still had property rights, and in the home and social life, they played a dominant role. Moreover, an ideal marriage was to be based on mutuality, and many referred to husband and wife as partners, with the same interests at stake (43-4).

The reign of James I

After Elizabeth's passing, James I ascended the throne. The trend of great social mobility in the Elizabethan era went on and became even greater. According to Barry Coward in *The Stuart Age*, this was due to inflationary and demographic pressures; society was still rigidly divided into the Elizabethan class pattern, but this was slowly starting to dissolve into less distinguishable groups (31). Marriage patterns were relatively stable: men as well as women married relatively late in life (21).

The position of women living in the Stuart era does not lend for much simplicity either. Coward asserts that ''there can have been no more disadvantaged people in early modern England than women'' (37). Their legal rights were practically non-existent and women were property of their husbands. Moreover, contemporaneous conduct books taught its readers that women were the ''weaker vessel'' in intellectual, moral and physical aspect, and that they should

serve men, be they father, husband or master. But in spite of this, Coward acknowledges that matters were more complicated than that, just like in the Elizabethan era (ibid). Women actively tried to negotiate better positions for themselves. For instance, they did this by exploiting their position as managers of their households, or they took on by-employments to contribute to the family economy, like spinning and weaving. Women also created and participated in female networks, which existed outside the home, on the streets and in church. They were used for support in their complaints against adulterous and violent men, often by openly shaming and condemning their abusers. These methods were non-violent and informal.

In spite of this complexity, English early modern society was strongly attached to its moral values, arguably the most important of which was female virtue. As in Elizabethan times, women were still seen as the cause of the biblical Fall, and the potential agents of the Devil himself. These ideas went well with those on magic and witchcraft. Witch hunts and the witch hysteria had their roots in the Middle Ages, when in 1486 two Dominican inquisitors published the extremely misogynistic *Malleus Maleficarum*, a guide on witchcraft, demonology and conducting witch trials. The inquisitors' ideas on witchcraft lived on, and gained momentum in England about a century later (Fritze 552).

Although witch trials and witch hunts were already common in Elizabethan times, their nature changed permanently when James I became king. People often turned to blame witches and the occult when faced with inexplicable events, such as bad harvests, illnesses with no cure, and infant mortality. In early modern times, the defendant was typically female; although there were male witches, witchcraft itself was very much gendered, because women were believed to be ‘‘more ignorant, more credulous, more obstinate, more impressionable, more proud, more malicious, more ambitious – the latter because they are bound to subjection’’ (Perkins qtd. in

Williams 35). She was also older than her accuser, lived alone and/or was unmarried, and was believed to work malevolent magic on her accuser and their family. The initiative of prosecution came from neighbours as opposed to authorities (Coward 47-8). The classic response to witchcraft changed when in 1597 James I published *Daemonologie*, a treatise on magic, demons and witchcraft. Not only did the book feed the belief in witchcraft, it criminalized it (Notestein 80). Coming from Scotland, where witch trials were very common, and believing that he himself had narrowly escaped murder by witches, James was personally involved with witchcraft. In his book, he outlines how witches are primarily motivated by revenge and money:

> [B]eing intised ether for the desire of revenge, or of worldly riches, their whole practises are either to hurte men and their gudes, or what they possesse, for satisfying of their cruell mindes in the former, or else by the wracke in whatsoever sorte, of anie whome God will permitte them to have power off, to satisfie their greedie desire in the last poynt. (King James I 29)

Witches seemingly only existed to ruin people's lives. James then goes on to claim that although there are male witches, the vast majority of them are women. This is because ''that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Devill, as was over well proved to be true, by the Serpents deceiving of Eva at the beginning'' (35-6). It is no wonder, therefore, that William Shakespeare added the three witches to ''Macbeth''; witchcraft was a sensitive topic and very much an issue of the time, and it catered to King James' interests.

We can see that social factors determining gender and power during the Elizabethan era and the reign of James I are many and complicated. Although there seems to have been a general

consensus on the role of men and women in marriage and life in general, there were many exceptions to this rule. This in turn was made more complicated by the belief in magic and witchcraft. In my analysis of ‘‘Macbeth’’ this complexity will be an important factor.

Chapter 2 – Gender and power relations in the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

Before moving on to the analysis, it is wise to give a brief summary of the play's plot. The play is set in Scotland. Generals Banquo and Macbeth, the titular character of the play, meet three witches. They make three predictions: Macbeth is to become Thane, Macbeth will become king, and Banquo's offspring will be kings, too. Soon, the first part of the prophecy is fulfilled: King Duncan pronounces Macbeth Thane of Cawdor after the previous Thane turns out to be a traitor. This rouses Macbeth's ambitious nature and he starts to contemplate killing the king. His ambitious and vengeful wife, Lady Macbeth, encourages him to commit the crime. Together, they murder the king in his sleep. Subsequently, Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain, and Then of Fife Macduff flee to England. With no heirs to the throne left, Macbeth becomes king. By this time, Macbeth is already being tortured by anxiety and feelings of guilt. With the witches' predictions in mind, he decides to kill Banquo and his son Fleance, the latter of whom escapes. Macbeth becomes insane, and starts having visions of Banquo's ghost, who visits him during a banquet. Lady Macbeth is guilt-ridden as well and starts sleepwalking. Macbeth decides to pay the witches a visit, and they misleadingly tell him that he will not be beaten by anyone born from a woman. The witches also tell Macbeth to be careful around Macduff, because he opposed Macbeth's accession to the throne. Right after his visit, Macbeth has Macduff's wife and children assassinated. After Macduff learns about this, he, Malcolm and the English count Siward decide to raise an army against Macbeth. Meanwhile, Macbeth learns that his wife is dead. After some time, the army penetrates Macbeth's castle and there is a confrontation between Macbeth and Macduff. Macbeth is confident that he will win until Macduff tells him that he was not born the natural way, but through caesarean section. Therefore, strictly speaking, he is not

born from a woman. Macbeth knows he will be defeated, and he is: Macduff decapitates him on the spot. In the last scene, Malcolm is crowned to be the rightful king of Scotland, and the peace returns.

Valerie Traub starts her essay *Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare* by painting a rather bleak picture of gender in the early modern era: in Shakespearean times, the family was strictly hierarchical, and wives were inferior to their husbands. As illustrated by Young in the previous chapter, the husband was the head of the household, including its servants. The women living in the household, whether they were wives or daughters, were deemed to need male protection. When it came to matters of money and income, they were dependent from men (Traub 130). As an example, Traub refers to a female character from another play by Shakespeare: Katherine from ‘‘The Taming of the Shrew’’, who encourages women to be accepting of their natural inferiority, and not to fight it. Traub goes on to list four womanly virtues that were seen as essential: obedience, chastity, silence and piety. Any woman who does not meet these requirements becomes a ‘‘shrew or scold’’ (130). Yet, Traub then highlights the fact that the very existence of this type of woman in Shakespeare’s plays implicitly goes against the rigid patriarchal structure in the Elizabethan era – after all, it suggested that some women did not (have to) obey or keep silent (130). Moreover, it suggests that Elizabethan England was ‘‘a culture of contradictions, with official ideology often challenged by actual social practice’’ (131). The relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as husband and wife is filled with these contradictions about gender roles.

The complex relationship between husband and wife living in Elizabethan times also becomes very clear in the play, which highlights that the gender roles for men and women are not always followed or straightforward. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are husband and wife, so

you would expect to see the familial hierarchy already explained in the previous chapter. Technically speaking, Macbeth is the head of their household and makes the decisions, and he is the one who hears and decides to act on the Witches' prophecy. Natalia Brzozowska in her essay ''The Idea of Ambition as a Social Process'' highlights the couple's close relationship, focusing on the fact that they, as man and wife, very much complement each other (273). This, as mentioned in the previous chapter, was one of the leading ideas of what relationships between men and women should be like. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth know perfectly what to expect of each other; they are companions. Yet this relationship ends up not being beneficial to both of them, as they are so well-acquainted with and complementary of each other that they as human beings seem to get lost in each other's characters. The reader of the play can also interpret this in another way: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth can assert their partner's gender, and perhaps even switch roles temporarily. In the play, too, the power relations shift, in favour of Lady Macbeth. We can also see this in her response to Macbeth's letter: ''Thou wouldst be great – / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it'' (Ant. 1.5.17-19). In the beginning, Macbeth is hesitant to kill Duncan and commit the crime that would pave the way to becoming king:

> This supernatural soliciting
> Cannot be ill – cannot be good. If ill,
> Why hath it given me earnest of success,
> Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair […]?'' (Ant. 1.3.131-135).

Lady Macbeth realises how full of doubt Macbeth is in his masculine acts, so she decides that she has to be the one to persuade him to kill the king. In the face of opportunity, she completely abandons the gender role that is expected of her, and instead ambitiously takes on her husband's challenge. In short, she becomes man-like, showing masculine traits.

This is further illustrated by Cristina Alfar, who asserts that women in early modern England were perceived to be evil because they supposedly acted in a masculine way. It reveals a double standard, as men were never subjected to this kind of criticism about their ambitions (25-6). She further holds that ''the actions of [the plays'] female characters become responses to specific marital and monarchical pressures'', which indicates that the women depicted in Shakespeare's plays were echoes of women living in the early modern era, who were under a lot of pressure to produce offspring and continue the lineage. Therefore, it makes sense that some ambitious women would do almost anything to ensure this. We can apply this to Lady Macbeth, who, in the face of the promise of power, encourages her husband to follow up on the witches' predictions and murder. Therefore in the beginning of the play, she holds the power in their relationship. Power does corrupt her, and later on in the fifth act of the play she becomes insane with guilt. However, she remains one of the agents in the play – perhaps a more powerful one than her husband. In fact, the masculine power that Macbeth should have lies in Lady Macbeth. We can also see this in her response to his letter about the Witches' prophecy. Macbeth's letter is jubilant, because the first part of the prophecy has already come true, and he has been given the new title of Thane of Cawdor. Nonetheless, Lady Macbeth knows her husband well enough and reminds the reader of his doubtful insecurity of nature. After the messenger who brought the letter has left, she calls upon evil spirits:

> 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 […]
> Come to my woman's breasts,
> And take my milk for gall […]. (Ant. 1.5.40-47)

In her pursuit of power, she calls upon evil spirits to take her female characteristics away, i.e. she wishes to become more of a man, so she can express her masculine ambitions and power. We could say that this also indicates a confirmation of the belief that women were prone to evil, and should not be given the same power as men. However, this argument fails when we look at the fact that when given the right opportunity, Macbeth becomes just as corrupted, ruthless and insane as she. Proneness to evil does not discriminate between the sexes, and has no interest in gender.

Lady Macbeth's role as a mother is another aspect worth analysing. Motherhood was the ultimate goal for a woman living in the Elizabethan era. Yet, as Stephanie Chamberlain suggests, early modern England saw much anxiety surrounding maternity, and Lady Macbeth in act one reveals much about its ideas about mothers' roles in perpetuation of patrilineage (73). On the one hand, mothers were revered and applauded because they were unconditionally devoted to their children, but they were also feared and condemned for harming the innocent beings entrusted to their care; there were dangers to maternal agency. Christopher Newstead claims that mothers affect their children the most, most of all since they are sure that they are theirs, and not someone

else's. Fathers lacked this reassurance (qtd. in Chamberlain 73-74). In other words, mothers very much impacted patrilineage in early modern England; in that respect, they held the power. This idea is reflected in Lady Macbeth: she, as a potential mother, takes away power from her husband by being prepared to kill their offspring, i.e. commit infanticide:

> I have given suck, and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
> And dashed the brains out! (Ant. 1.7.54-58)

This can be seen as ironic, as Lady Macbeth is obviously power-hungry, but will not be able to pass on this power via offspring. This is because she explicitly denounces her role as a woman, vowing to kill her potential children to become a man. We can even say that Lady Macbeth becomes too man-like and shows too many masculine traits to produce children. She thereby also does away with the early modern idea that a woman should have children.

In conclusion, we can see several contradictions about and commentary on early modern gender roles in the way William Shakespeare depicted the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. For example, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth complement each other as husband and wife, echoing one particular Elizabethan/Stuart idea on the relationships between husband and wife. However, it is because of this kind of relationship that their lives start to deteriorate: they switch gender roles. This is in favour of Lady Macbeth, who wants to give up her femininity to become a man. Shakespeare also responds to the pressure on Elizabethan/Stuart women to

produce children, and with it highlights the anxiety about infanticide and patrilineage, which in fact gave power to these women.

Chapter 3 – Gender and power relations as seen in the Weird Sisters

‘‘Macbeth’’ starts off with the Weird Sisters in its very first act, introducing them as witches who are planning their next gathering. The act primarily functions to foreshadow their plans with Macbeth, and shows who and what the play will be about. The witches will find him after he has ensured a victory in battle, and received the new title of Thane of Cawdor (Ant.1.1.1-12). Although the Weird Sisters feature in only a few scenes of the play, they are arguably the reason of the progression of its plotline, or at the least the catalyst of it. What makes the characters so intriguing is the ambiguity of their characters. The reader is never explicitly told the witches’ exact origins, who they are, and why they are there in the first place. The reader is also left to wonder what their exact function is, how they influence the plotline, and how much power they have, as Susan Snyder lays out in her essay ‘‘Theology as Tragedy in Macbeth’’:

> Their impact on the action is problematic. […] [The witches] know that Macbeth will be king. Does their foreknowledge make inevitable the action by which he achieves that state? Do they incite him, anyway, toward murdering Duncan by letting him know what the reward will be? Or do they merely spell out the end, leaving any decisions about the means to that end – active or passive – entirely to him? (75)

They seem to be the source of Macbeth’s temptation to evil, playing on his dangerous ambitions, which corresponds to an idea popular during the Elizabethan era and the start of the Stuart era, i.e. the one claiming that women are the cause of all evil and sin, and that Eve was responsible for the Fall. They also seem to be witches in the traditional sense, as described in James’s

Daemonologie: they are old women, they kill and they pursue petty vendettas because that is how they function as witches. Still, when Banquo and Macbeth stumble upon the witches for the first time, they are not even sure what they are dealing with:

> BANQUO. What are these,
>
> So withered and so wild in their attire? –
>
> That look not like th' inhabitants of the earth
>
> […] You should be women,
>
> And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
>
> That you are so. (Ant. 1.3.40-8)

In other words, it is not immediately clear who and what they are, and what kind of power they have. Even their sex is uncertain at the beginning, seeing as they have beards, a male characteristic. In her work *Understanding Macbeth*, Faith Nostbakken observes that although the witches' nature remains ambiguous, the play suggests that they do not completely determine Macbeth's actions. If they did, that would make Macbeth merely a victim whose actions are not his own. He would not be the tragic figure who ''wades deeper into his own darkness, pulling the kingdom down with him'' (86).

Another factor adding to the question of the witches' origins is the character of Hecate, Greek goddess of magic, the moon, necromancy, and witchcraft. Hecate is introduced in Act 3, Scene 5, and is the entity the three witches have to answer and report to. Therefore, the witches are not solely a reflection of contemporaneous ideas about witchcraft, but are also connected to Greek mythology. This idea is supported by Laura Shamas in *''We Three'': The Mythology of*

Shakespeare's Weird Sisters:

> By transforming the Weird Sisters into witches and placing them under Hecate's dominion, Shakespeare expands their archetypal resonance into the underworld of classical mythology and fairy tales. […] Certainly, the Weird Sisters […] are directly related to the classic mythological idea of ''fate'' or ''The Fates/Moirai.'' However, the ''Wyrdes or Weirds'' are Anglo-Saxon in origin, and not Greco-Roman. (35)

In her introductory scene, she angrily confronts the witches with their nerve to ''trade and traffic with Macbeth, / In riddles, and affairs of death'' (4-5). She is their leader, and wants to be involved in the Sisters' dealings with Macbeth, vowing to lead Macbeth to his destruction (15-6). The witches' connection to the muses or fates of Greek mythology thereby implies a form of femininity contradicting the popular Elizabethan and Stuart idea that men are superior to women by default. Shakespeare instead wrote the witches to be powerful, vengeful, and above all, not governed by men but by a woman (whom they defy at least once).

But despite the mystery of the witches' function in the play, we can still categorise the witches by their sex: after all, they are called the Weird Sisters by other characters in the play. This makes it easier to apply a gender analysis to the trio. Marguerite Tassi claims that the witches' actions and powers are based upon malice and revenge, and as such they are a representation or ''specters'' of feminine vengefulness. She underscores this view by referring to the third scene of Act One during which the witches discuss their plans to punish a sailor whose wife has affronted them, hitting him with storms and evoking demonic sexual possession (62). They can also be viewed as a kind of representation of criticism against the patriarchal order that

was still very much at work in Elizabethan and Stuart times. According to John Drakakis in *Macbeth: A Critical Reader*, ‘‘the Weird Sisters represent linguistically and visually what happens when sovereign power, which authorizes representation and prescribes and legitimizes meaning, is laid bare: they invert reality, but in doing so they expose the mystery of patriarchal power for the ideological fraud that it is’’ (143). In other words, the Witches are unlike any other female character in the play: they are not controlled by men, and they have certain (malevolent) powers which they do not hesitate to use. They expose the masculine power and later on even take it from men.

An equally important observation is that in many ways, Lady Macbeth and the witches relate to one another, share many characteristics and can be seen as equal in some respects. The play shows this too: it implies specific ideas about femininity and what it means to be a woman. Firstly, the scenes in which female figures champion evil take turns with scenes that depict the public sphere, which are exclusively male. For example, the play starts with the witches’ first gathering, which is followed by the scene in which a captain reports on a victorious battle, and this scene is exclusively male. Similarly, in the fifth scene of Act One, Lady Macbeth calls upon evil spirits to make her more of a man, and in the scene after that, the Macbeth family invites King Duncan and several other male guests to their castle. This corresponds with the early modern English idea that there should be a strict division between private life, which is typically reserved for women and the home, and public life, which is very much male (Stallybrass 196). In the third and fifth scene of the play, it compares Lady Macbeth and the witches in a more explicit way. The third scene opens with the witches, who are joined by Macbeth. They then greet him by hailing him by all of his titles. This is echoed in the fifth scene, when Lady Macbeth is practicing witchcraft, and also hails Macbeth by his titles upon entering the scene (ibid).

More specifically, Lady Macbeth and the witches are ‘‘equated by their equivocal relation to an implied form of femininity’’ (196). Their femininity is never truly or fully shown to the audience. As has already been stated before, though they are obviously women, the witches do not bear physical characteristics that are clearly feminine. The witches are called the Weird Sisters, but they do have beards, and they do not seem to be tied to husbands or families to look after. Lady Macbeth, while she lacks a beard, does have a family to look after, but she is only interested in doing that when it serves her thirst for power. Thirst for power and ambition are usually attributed to men. Also, in her response to Macbeth’s letter about the witches’ prophecy, she does not cower, but instead invokes evil and demonic spirits to unsex her on the spot. In short, the witches as well as Lady Macbeth seem to express a very specific form of femininity, and one that does not easily compare to the early-modern notion of it. In fact, we can clearly see a contradiction between, or separation of, families of men and so-called ‘‘anti-families’’ of women. The former are virtuous; and the latter are prone to hatred, evil and revenge. At least at the beginning of the play, Macbeth belongs to the former group, while his wife is in the latter. Lady Macbeth says that she has ‘‘given suck,’’ but the reader never sees any proof of this, and while invoking evil spirits, she refers to her mother’s milk as poisonous (198). Therefore, she can be seen as an unnatural mother and sterile. It links and equates her to the witches, who in the fourth act are making brews with ‘‘finger[s] of birth-strangled babe[s]’’ and the blood of a sow that ate its own litter.

Another compelling connection between the witches and Lady Macbeth can be seen in their depiction of the early modern association of witchcraft with motherhood. Dympna Callaghan, quoted in Stephanie Chamberlain’s essay ‘‘Fantasizing Infanticide’’, claims that early modern witches were imaged as a type of mother, despite their sexless image. She explains this

by referring to the strong associations early modern cultures had to the age-old goddess of fertility, who had all procreative power (qtd. in Chamberlain 81). Shakespeare's use of the word 'hag' to describe the Weird Sisters implies a specific belief about spirits. Etymologically, the term hag came from ''hegge'' or ''heg'', and it was first used when describing an ''evil spirit, demon, or infernal being, in female form; applied in early use to the Furies, Harpies etc. of Greco Latin mythology''. It was only later on that it gained the meaning of old, wrinkly woman. In another play by Shakespeare, ''The Tempest'', the term hag is used again in relation to Sycorax, a dead witch. Prospero notes about her: ''Then was this island? / Save for the son that she did litter here, / A freck led whelp, hag-born – not honoured with / A human shape'' (Ant. 1.2.283-6). This use of the term suggests a connection between witches, witchcraft, and motherhood. The witches and Lady Macbeth can all be called hags, because they are all involved with witchcraft and invoking evil spirits, and therefore they are all mother-type figures. Although the witches do not explicitly function as mother figures in the play, it is clear that Lady Macbeth does, confirming this link between her and them. The witches and Lady Macbeth are demonic mothers, embodying the anxiety about women, witchcraft, and the role of women as mothers.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's depictions of the witches and Lady Macbeth cannot be connected to Elizabethan and Stuart ideas of gender and masculinity/femininity in a simple and straightforward way. Firstly, the witches' origins, motifs and power are mysterious. They do actively tempt Macbeth to do evil deeds, corresponding to the popular idea that women are evil creatures as a result of the Fall. Still, their motifs to do this remain vague. Secondly, the Sisters are not governed by men, but instead have to answer to the Greek goddess Hecate. Theirs is a kind of femininity that does not easily compare to the Elizabethan and Stuart notion that men are in principle superior to women in every way. Because of this, they lay bare the mystery of

patriarchal power, exposing masculine power and taking it away from men. Moreover, they display characteristics typically attributed to men: they are hateful, ambitious, and evil. Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth is reminiscent of the Elizabethan and Stuart notion that the public and private spheres were to be strictly separated. Contrary to the witches, she has a husband and family. Still, she can be equated to the witches because although she fulfils her duties as a wife, she only does this to ultimately gain more power. In fact, Lady Macbeth and the Sisters can all be seen as part of a so-called anti-family who are vengeful and prone to evil. Lady Macbeth and the witches are women and therefore are defined by their potential as mothers, but they are anything but mother-like figures. In his play, Shakespeare also shows contemporaneous anxiety about women, women as mothers, and witchcraft. Lady Macbeth can be called a witch, but is not like the witches as described by Barry Coward in *The Stuart Era*; after all, she has a family and is not old or living alone. As a consequence, she subverts from and twists the standard notions about women. Similarly, the witches are based upon Anglo-Saxon tradition, but are not the stereotypical witches as described by James I in his *Daemonologie*. They contradict contemporaneous notions about femininity because they display masculine traits and are not part of the patriarchy.

Conclusion

This thesis originated from the following research question: Focusing on the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters in particular, how can we interpret ideas of gender roles and masculinity/femininity popular during the Elizabethan era and the early Stuart period? William Shakespeare was one of the most influential literary figures of his time, and his plays were a reflection of the society he lived in. Needless to say, the plays also reflected Elizabethan and Stuart ideas about gender, masculinity, femininity, and power relations.

As has been shown in the research, the answer to this is not simple or straightforward. In the Elizabethan era, men were generally seen as superior to women in every way imaginable. A woman's place was in the home, while she took care of the family. Because of said expected role, an education was out of the question for most women, the most obvious example being Queen Elizabeth. Women simply had no use for it, as they would never become lawyers or doctors. Still, women had a choice in whom they decided to marry, and marriages were generally based on mutual consent. In ''Macbeth'', Lady Macbeth's education is never mentioned, but her primary concerns are her family. Then again, she only serves her family because she is hungry for power. Also, from the start, she is much more ambitious and forward in her acts than her husband, persuading him to commit a murder. In that sense, she can be viewed as manlier and therefore more powerful than him.

Also, the Elizabethan era and the reign of King James I knew different ideas about gender. There was the idea that the sexes were complementary, but another view was that in fact women were superior to men, and yet another one held that men and women were absolutely equal to one another. This is reflected in the fact that many women in the Elizabethan era looked

at Elizabeth's education and decided to choose professions too. Women were also often managers of households, took on by-employments, and banded together against abusive men. Complementarity seems to be the view that fits Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's relationship the best: after all, they know each other very well and know where the other is lacking. Still, this makes a straightforward analysis even more difficult. From the beginning onwards, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth know each other so well that they make the boundaries between them almost disappear: they even adopt each other's gender roles, so that Macbeth in his doubtful state looks to be more feminine, while his wife wishes to be unsexed and become a man.

Matters about gender and gender roles become even more complicated when looking at the reign of King James I. The Stuart era went on to put great emphasis on moral values, one of the most important being female virtue. The ideal woman was to be chaste and obedient, and subservient to men. Her moral opposite was the shrew, who actively defied men and patriarchal structures in general. Yet, the very existence of the shrew confirms her existence in early modern society, and even legitimized it. Ideas about this contradiction were expressed in James I's *Daemonologie*, a book about magic, witch hunts, and witchcraft. According to James, a witch was most often a woman living alone, and older than her accuser. He further claimed that the vast majority of witches were women, confirming that ideas on witchcraft were very much gendered. He also argued that women were more likely to be witches than men were, because the former were weaker than the latter.

James's notions about witches and witchcraft are reflected in the Weird Sisters, as they are hateful and vengeful old women. One of their functions in the play is to tempt Macbeth to evil, echoing ideas about humanity becoming evil because Eve caused the Fall. Still, their nature remains ambiguous throughout much of the play; the reader is never told about their exact origin

and the reason they are there. Also, although Macbeth seems to need some encouragement in order to act on his desires, he does so himself. The Weird Sisters may be able to play tricks on his mind, but only he is able to physically commit murder. Moreover, the witches do not only correspond to Anglo-Saxon mythology still popular during the Elizabethan and Stuart era, but also to ancient Greek mythology. Their leader is Hecate, Greek goddess of witchcraft and necromancy. The witches become a mix of Anglo-Saxon and Greek mythology: on the one hand, they are stereotypically female, vengeful, and hateful; on the other, they are powerful and do not allow themselves to be ruled by men. In other words, they confirm as well as turn around Elizabethan and Stuart ideas on witches. They represent a rebellion against the patriarchal power, expose the corrupt nature of male power and take it away from men.

Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters show clear similarities between them. They seem to express their own special kind of femininity. The witches, while they are called the *Weird Sisters*, do not bear explicitly female traits. Neither do they answer to men or have families or husbands to look after, and they are led by Hecate, a goddess. Lady Macbeth seems to contrast them in every way, as she does have a family and husband, but she also has evil ambitions. For this reason, they all belong to so-called anti-families, contradicting Elizabethan and Stuart family ideals. ‘Normal’ families can be seen to be those of men, and they are virtuous and non-violent. Anti-families, on the other hand, are families of women who are powerful, and full of hatred and revenge. Lady Macbeth is but a humble human being, yet she still can be called a witch, because she calls upon evil spirits to help her achieve her depraved goals. Lady Macbeth and the witches are also a reflection of the early modern anxiety about women, motherhood, and witchcraft. Although women were widely seen as weaker than men, they were still feared because of their connection to children and lineage, which gave them power over men. Women were expected to

have children and start families, but there was much danger involved; mothers were seen as utterly devoted to their children, but as their primary parent and guardian, they could easily harm them and thereby destroy the patrilineage. This anxiety is shown when Lady Macbeth vows to kill her children if she must.

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