Containing The (M)Other:
Gendered Implications of the Shakespearean Carnivalesque[1]

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"The sublime is not simply a site for the definition of masculinity but is also where a certain deviant or transgressive form of femininity is played out. It is where woman goes beyond her proper boundaries and gets out of place."[i]

   Although it is never explicitly announced, the anxiety of a powerful woman lies at the heart of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* [c.1606] and *The Winter's Tale* [1610]. Implying that a woman could exist without a man, this anxiety threatened the predominantly patriarchal structure of early modern England. Terry Eagleton explains:

> From a phallocentric viewpoint a woman appears to have nothing between her legs, which is as alarming for men as it is reassuring. On the one hand, this apparent lack in the female confirms the male's power over her; on the other hand, it stirs in him unconscious thoughts of his own possible castration, reminding him that his own being may not be as flawlessly complete as he had imagined. The sight of an external lack may stimulate a sense of vacancy within himself, which he can plug, paradoxically, with the woman idealized as fetish: if woman has nothing between her legs then she is a desexualized Madonna, whose purity of being can protect him totemically against the chaos which the female nothing threatens.[ii]

This idealized and fetishized woman was often channeled into two identities – the passive virgin (Ophelia) or the power-hungry grotesque (Gertrude). This paper will focus on three female identities in *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale* – the witch, the female tyrant, and the passive wife. While the three identities don't perfectly conform to the binary of virgin/grotesque, they do pose the same threat that stems from such a binary – the exposure of male impotency. The women of these plays lie within the same realm of transgression by seeking power in a patriarchal society that assigns power based on gender. This anxiety about female power theatrically manifests in supernatural characters: in particular, the witches of *Macbeth* and the statue of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*. But ultimately defeated, the symbols of female power are effectively banished from narratives resigned to the reign of the (male) monarch.

   The crucial threat of the witches in *Macbeth* is their resistance to Macbeth's desire to conquer. Wanting to master both his own fate and the fate of others, he struggles to become a source of unquestionable authority. Upon his first encounter with the witches, Macbeth orders them to

> Stay, you imperfect speakers […]
> Say from whence

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[1] While the paper is not necessarily an exploration of Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnival as it relates to *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale*, it explores the aftermath of the Carnival. Echoing what I refer to as the Shakespearean Carnivalesque, these plays continue in the spirit of the carnival; principally, they are concerned with mocking established forms and conventions (in this case, of predominantly patriarchal societies). For more information, please refer to Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. R.W. Rostel. New York: Ardis, 1973. (89)

> You owe this strange intelligence or why
> Upon this blasted heath you stop our way
> With such prophetic greeting. Speak, I charge you.[iii]

But after he summons them to explain, the witches vanish. Physically evading mastery, they remain uncontrollable. Like Macbeth, Banquo struggles to claim the supernatural sisters. When trying to describe them, he cannot assign them a particular gender. He laments, "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so."[iv] Banquo's inability to categorize the witches is especially problematic in a world in which language and identity are so closely linked. Jenny Edkins writes,

> We become who we are by finding our place within the social order and family structures into which we are born. That social order is produced in symbolic terms, though language. Language does not just name things that are already there in the world. Language divides up the world in particular ways to produce for every social grouping what it calls 'reality'.[v]

Because language bestows social identity, it is especially problematic that both Banquo and Macbeth cannot locate the witches within the gender spectrum. Attempting to logically envision the world, the male tyrant remains on an endless journey towards total epistemological control: everything has a rightful place. There is an inherent stability in their envisioned world, and thus these tyrants invest in language's ability to imbue life with a fixed order. But if the title "Thane of Glamis" announces Macbeth's identity, the witches' ambiguous title – the Weïrd sisters – liberates them. The witches resist the patriarch's vision: they cannot be easily assimilated into his envisioning of the world and consequently threaten an established hierarchy of power rooted in the word.

Lady Macbeth also assaults this hierarchy. Like the witches' sway over the narrative, she haunts Macbeth – both tyrant and play – even if physically absent. Thinking that his wife is asleep, Macbeth starts to doubt if he should kill Duncan, the present king of Scotland. He exclaims:

> Besides, this Duncan
> Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
> So clear in his great office, that his virtues
> Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
> The deep damnation of his taking-off […]
> I have no spur
> To prick the sides of my intent, but only
> Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
> And falls on th' other –
> *(Enter Lady Macbeth)*
> How now, what news?[vi]

A dramatic manifestation of her claustrophobia-inducing capabilities, Lady Macbeth's stage entrance silences her husband's revelatory speech. Once in her presence, he represses his transgressive behavior: he now "will proceed no further in this business".[vii]

Even language participates in this assault against the male tyrant. After the witches appear with the three apparitions, they bid Macbeth to "Seek to know no more."[viii] When spoken aloud, the witches' summon can mean one of four things – to *know no* more, *no know* more, *know know* more, or, perhaps most tellingly, *no no* more. This underlying negation fuels Macbeth's dramatic journey; this threatening anxiety drives him to conquer those around him in a

vain attempt to ensure that life is not simply "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing."[ix] In a play in which royal subject slaughters monarch, the chivalric tradition appears to have disintegrated. Wives undermine their husbands, regicide becomes a means for political advancement, and individual profit overruns collective wellbeing. If Macbeth were to speak those lines, it might read, "Seek to know nothing more." But with the witches, signifiers and their corresponding signifieds fluctuate. For any word to have dual meanings suggests a linguistic instability echoing the witches' own instability; they are simultaneously prophetic authority for Macbeth and mere sirens for Banquo. Their instability – linguistic and otherwise – defies common conceptions of power: predominantly, that it was male and unwavering. They firmly remain outside of the patriarch's envisioning of the world. Macbeth has no choice but to accept their guidance even if accepting it means to accept their volatility.

Fortunately for Macbeth, the supernatural women are disempowered. The witches' prophecies are proven wrong, and Lady Macbeth's repressed guilt consumes her. Sleepwalking, she cries out,

> The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is
> She now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No
> More o' that, my lord, no more o' that. You mar all
> With this starting.[x]

The remorseful Lady Macbeth ultimately restores the patriarchal envisioning of her husband's kingdom. She now returns to the parameters under which we should know her – submissive wife and dutiful subject. In the speech, she identifies foremost with the wife of the Thane of Fife and twice implores her lord to have "No more o' that."[xi] Relinquishing agency to the patriarchal agent, her return to a submissive state assuages the gender anxieties she originally provoked. Likewise, Macbeth's final moments alive also disprove the witches' authority. Macduff's premature birth debunks their claim that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth."[xii] Macbeth thus proclaims,

> Accursèd be the tongue that tells me so,
> For it hath cowed my better part of man!
> And be these juggling fiends no more believed
> That palter with us in a double sense[xiii]

The "double sense" that Macbeth mentions is intrinsically linked to the instability of the witches' language. Linguistic ambiguity compromises Macbeth's vision, and thus the cursed tongue is at odds with the mind. Although thought remains singular – Macbeth believes that it is "know no more" – speech oftentimes does not. But yet he continues to create his vision of the world; his onslaught against Macduff and the forces of England expresses his newfound sense of power – he has assumed (perceived) near-complete omnipotence. He can now restore their "know no more" to "know no more" and in doing so finishes "mapping" both the natural and supernatural world. In Macbeth's map, the originally threatening and supernatural women can be dismissed as either frail – Lady Macbeth – or epistemologically insufficient – the witches.

Dissimilar in tone, genre, and location, *The Winter's Tale* echoes *Macbeth* in its investigation of power, gender, and anxiety. While *Macbeth* portrays its king as victim, *The Winter's Tale* depicts its king as fool. Leontes, the king of Sicily, discloses his paranoiac suspicions to his confidante, Camillo. The chief suspicion – that his wife Hermione has slept with his friend Polixenes, the king of Bohemia – is met with resistance. Camillo begs Leontes to reconsider, to which Leontes retorts,

> Is whispering nothing?

> Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?
> Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career
> Of laughter with a sigh? – a note infallible
> Of breaking honesty. Horsing foot on foot?
> Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?
> Hours minutes? Noon midnight? And all eyes
> Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,
> That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing?
> Why, then the world and all that's in 't is nothing,
> The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
> My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
> If this be nothing.[xiv]

Leontes cannot be wrong because he is the king, and his exaggerated suspicions emblematize Macbeth's romanticized authority. Furthermore, his "reading" of Hermione and Polixenes's interactions must be right because in the patriarchal vision, there is a singular authoritative source. Camillo's doubt recalls the witches' unstable language (could Leontes have wrongly interpreted it as *The Winter's Tale*'s equivalent of "no no more"?), and Leontes continues to invest in his visioning of the world. But unlike Macbeth, Leontes will not be interrupted. He can conclude his speech –Hermione has committed adultery because Leontes wills it so in his compulsive imagination. For him to be wrong about Hermione and Polixenes would imply that "the world and all that's in 't is nothing". For the tyrant to be wrong would be nothing short of apocalyptic destruction. Leontes, "an Othello who is his own Iago," is the ultimate embodiment of self-creation.[xv] If he wills it, other modes of authority – the courts, the military, and the prisons – will ensure that it materializes.

However, Hermione momentarily disrupts Leontes' authority. After the oracle declares his accusations false, Leontes retaliates by declaring that

> There is no truth at all i' th' oracle.
> The sessions shall proceed. This is mere falsehood.[xvi]

Although the oracle has been dismissed, Leontes still must confront his wife. Because extramarital sexuality undermines his perceived authority, he imprisons her. The threat that male power can be interchangeable surfaces when Leontes discusses Hermione's subversive sexuality:

> Now while I speak this, holds his wife by th' arm,
> That little thinks she has been sluiced in 's absence,
> And his pond fished by his next neighbor, by
> Sir Mile, his neighbor. Nay, there's comfort in 't
> Whiles other men have gates and those gates opened,
> As mine, against their will.[xvii]

With the pond representing an unfaithful wife, Sir Mile endangers both the pond and the pond's owner. Additionally, the other metaphor of gates being pried opened presents a frightening implication. Because gates were contemporary early modern slang for female genitalia, it is crucial that both "those" gates – and the pond's owner's – were opened against their will.[xviii] The implication is obvious: Polixenes' sexual violence extends into the male realm. For Polixenes to sleep with Hermione wounds Leontes because he is the keeper of the metaphorical pond – he remains the sentry for his wife despite her alleged infidelity.[2] Curiously, this anxiety of male

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[2] Ironically, the abundant metaphors and double entendres of both plays are just as double-sided as the witches' "know no more". Metaphors and the like tend to be interpreted in at least two

sexual violence exists only in the linguistic (rather than the dramatic) sphere. As Bruce R. Smith argues, "Constantly in fear of losing their masculine self-possession, Shakespeare's protagonists […] are caught up in an endless, ultimately hopeless situation. They must keep *talking* about anxiety in a futile attempt to *contain* anxiety."[xix] Rather than allay anxieties by exhuming them through speech, male tyrants such as Leontes discuss them by *not* discussing them; the anxieties permeate the narrative through numerous metaphors and double entendres like the aforementioned gates and ponds.[3] The anxiety thus sustains itself: the men perpetuate it through speech.

Fortunately, Hermione's death quells Leontes' anxieties. After hearing about her son's death, she collapses in a fit of hysteria and appears to have died. However, Hermione transcends mortality and instead becomes a statue, an embodiment of the containment that Leontes so desperately needs. He

> must experience a reprieve from the exigencies of female erotic life before he can re-enter marriage with any degree of psychic comfort; and, more importantly, that Hermione's 'unmanageable' sexuality must be metaphorically contained and psychically disarmed.[xx]

 To assuage her husband's fury, Hermione must be removed from the narrative because she refuses to submit to his will and resign herself to a guilt she does not deserve. Because her son's death physically jeopardizes her, Hermione can assimilate back into the role of the dutiful mother. Similarly, her non-bastard daughter Perdita must leave Sicily to appease the narrative of the omnipotent patriarch.

And yet the supernatural metamorphoses of Hermione (first from corpse into statue and then from statue to human) complicate the matter. After he encounters his statued wife, Leontes instructs Paulina to summon Hermione to life, to which she orders, "Music, awake her! Strike! / 'Tis time. Descend. Be stone no more. Approach."[xxi] Syntactically echoing Leontes' earlier command of "Proceed. / No foot shall stir," Paulina's commands spring the statue back to life.[xxii] But the staccato orders from Leontes to Paulina and then from Paulina to Hermione articulate how power circulates in the Sicilian court. Commands can switch from one person to another, but yet the origin of authority remains the same – Leontes. Paulina summons Hermione to life because of Leontes' bidding, but he then discredits her in exclaiming,

> O, she's warm !
> If this be magic, let it be an art
> Lawful as eating.[xxiii]

By removing the element of supernatural wonder, Leontes disempowers Paulina and her transient omnipotence. Rendering her authority a logical phenomenon, he demystifies the supernatural and locates it within his map of the world. He restores his kingdom to its initial hierarchy once Hermione becomes once again dependent on men to sustain her.

(oftentimes conflicting) ways. Leontes transfers his implicit anxiety over male sexuality onto the metaphor of Sir Mile and the pond and involuntarily perpetuates in this fluctuating language.

[3] Even Leontes' earlier outburst – beginning with "Is whispering nothing?" – is steeped in "anxious language". The obsessive referencing to "nothing," used nine times in only thirteen lines, reinforces the notion of linguistically perpetuating unspoken fears. "Nothing," yet another early modern slang term for female genitalia, appears to have fascinated Shakespeare; the word was featured in countless plays as well as most noticeably in *Much Ado About Nothing* [c. 1598-99]. For more, please refer to Williams, Gordon. *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature.* London: The Athalone Press, 1994. (960)

As with Lady Macbeth, Hermione's return to passivity marks the beginning of the legitimized tyrant's reinstatement. Upon her transformation, Camillo notes that "[Hermione] hangs about [Leontes'] neck. / If she pertain to life, let her speak too."[xxiv] Camillo's observation evokes Leontes' earlier remark about Hermione and Polixenes; he says that the man who "infects" her is "he that wears her like her medal, hanging / About his neck".[xxv] Leontes amalgamates ownership, entitlement, and submission: to "have" Hermione is to have her around your neck and at your disposal. Objectified, she returns "about [Leontes'] neck" immediately after becoming human again. After her return, she speaks only eight lines, all of which inquire about Perdita and the courts. Hermione can reenter the narrative once she returns from beyond the realm of male consciousness. In both plays, transgressive women are exiled to altered states of consciousness – Lady Macbeth sleepwalking and Hermione lapsing into a coma-like state as a statue. But in returning from these psychological realms, they assimilate back into the patriarch's kingdom.

When approached as a complementary pair, *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale* illuminate one another. Just as Leontes has too much power, Macbeth has too little. While both men struggle with the Other – witches, oracles, and autonomous wives – they ultimately defeat it and banish it outside of the narrative. The witches' prophecies are disproved, the oracle is proven wrong, and Lady Macbeth and Hermione become the dutiful wives and mothers once more. Tragedy exaggerates Macbeth's powerlessness while comedy exaggerates Leontes' tyranny. But while the plays may differ in tone and genre, the theme remains consistent – the threat of the powerful and indefinable woman.

The Winter's Tale and *Macbeth* both depict the momentary collapse of an established authority – the omnipotent patriarch. Because of the transgressively ambitious women in their lives, the two kings change: they become either weak (Macbeth) or a mockery of unchecked authority (Leontes). However, the assumptions that underlie the Shakespearean Carnivalesque are steeped in gender anxieties of early modern England. *Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale* immediately follow the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, an enormously successful female monarch. However, Elizabeth's reign was one of paradoxes; although she was powerful, she arguably derived much of her power through her asexual appearance. As the "Virgin Queen," she went to great pains to appear untouchable and thus detach herself from the female sphere. Occasionally dressed in male military attire, she worked within the confines of a patriarchal society, ironically perpetuating the idea that power and women are mutually exclusive.

The Carnivalesque disruption of power in many of Shakespeare's plays is both tyrannical and male. Therefore, the non-powers are distinctly non-tyrannical (supernatural) and non-male (female). Lady Macbeth sleepwalks, the witches epitomize the supernatural, and Hermione moves from body to statue to body once more. Accordingly, one of the many the gendered implications of the Shakespearean Carnivalesque is that men always return to power after the return to tradition. The kingdom of Leontes is restored, and even if Macbeth dies, another king – Malcolm – ascends to the throne. Moving back into the natural realm, the return to patriarchal tradition encapsulates the dominant cultural anxieties regarding gender and power. Because the (M)Other is contained and defeated, the king can now reign without the threat of the unsubmissive woman.

[i] Nead, Lynda. *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992. (29)

[ii] Eagleton, Terry. *William Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1986. (64)

[iii] Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992. (I. iii. 73-81) All references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the endnotes.

[iv] Ibid. (I. iii. 47-49)

[v] Edkins, Jenny. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. (11)

[vi] (I. vii. 16-29)

[vii] (I. vii. 34)

[viii] (IV. i. 118)

[ix] (V. v. 29-31)

[x] (V. i. 44-47)

[xi] (V. i. 45-46)

[xii] (IV. i. 91-92)

[xiii] (V. viii. 21-24)

[xiv] Shakespeare, William. *The Winter's Tale*. Ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992. (I. ii. 347-359) All references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the endnotes.

[xv] Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998. (639)

[xvi] (III. ii. 151-152)

[xvii] (I. ii. 241-246)

[xviii] (24)

[xix] Smith, Bruce R. *Shakespeare and Masculinity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. (5)

[xx] Traub, Valerie. *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama*. New York: Routledge, 1992. (45)

[xxi] (V. iii. 122-125)

[xxii] (V. iii. 122-23)

[xxiii] (V. iii. 136-138)

[xxiv] (V. iii. 140-141)

[xxv] (I. ii. 373-374)

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