

Monstrous Gender Performances in *Macbeth*

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Macbeth is considered one of Shakespeare's most accessible tragedies and has been an integral part of international school curricula for several years. It seems that *Macbeth* took Hamlet's place as the nation's favourite Shakespearean hero in 2018, given the nineteen productions staged in the UK alone (Rear). Christie Carson names the #MeToo movement as one of the reasons for the play's sudden popularity because many productions "depend on an assumed misogyny which wants to absolve *Macbeth* of responsibility for his actions," and expects the 2018 productions to "challeng[e] that misogyny in a world of sexual misconduct scandals" (Rear). Indeed, the Weird Sisters and Lady *Macbeth* have generated their very own discourse of critical reception and are often dismissed as an incarnation of 'demonic femininity.' This misogynist discourse can be traced back to the link between femininity and monstrosity established in ancient Greek conceptions of gender. Aristotle famously writes:

Just as it sometimes happens that deformed offspring are produced by deformed parents, and sometimes not, so the offspring produced by a female are sometimes female, sometimes not, but male. The reason is that the female is as it were a deformed male. (II 737a)

Aristotle not only assumes an inherent otherness of women but also a physical deformity derived from the premise that they are not male. The notion of gender deformity invites and easily mingles with other discriminatory practices that render women monstrous. One example is the method of victim-blaming in rape cases that attempts to justify sexual abuse by accrediting women with a seductive, monstrous power that men cannot resist. Similarly, Shakespeare forms a steady connection between femininity and monstrosity in Hamlet's dialogue with Ophelia, where he claims that "wise men know well enough what monsters you make / of them" (*Ham.* 3.1.138-39). Similarly, Antony scorns Cleopatra: "of all thy sex; most monster-like be shown" (*Ant.* 4.12.36), when he falsely accuses her of betrayal, referencing the etymology of 'monster.'

In his essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey J. Cohen defines and deconstructs textual monsters, his base assumption being that each monster helps understand the culture it is born into. Derived from the Latin *monstrare*, which means 'to show,' a monster indirectly points to the deeply rooted

fears and anxieties of a society at a certain point in time. Cohen elaborates:

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads [of subject and body], as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read.

(4)

The monstrous is a shapeshifter, depending on constant reinterpretation. Consequently, I aim at deconstructing monstrous physicality to reveal the cultural anxieties it embodies.

Just like some monsters stem from gender anxiety, gender theory complements Cohen's theses. Not unlike the monster, "gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time" (Butler 16). Thus, gender constructions and monstrous creations are related in their ability to shift and change throughout time and culture. Moreover, Judith Butler argues that "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair" (22). In the same way that the binary perception of gender limits certain gender performances, "the monster prevents mobility...delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move" (Cohen

12). Binary gender constructs and monsters both reinforce social borders and prohibit individual mobility. According to Jack Halberstam, masculinity "becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (2). To become legible means to cross the borders that separate the normative from the Other, or hegemonic masculinity from fluid gender expressions. Thus, the monstrous guards the fine line between socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, whereby gender non-conformity becomes monstrous as soon as it becomes visible. Thus, social mobility—the ability to cross borders—and monstrosity are inseparably linked: both theories formulate separate spaces and a line that cannot be crossed—it is the transgression of said line, however, that subverts the integrity of seemingly stable constructs like gender. Misogyny already contains this association of femininity with monstrosity, which this article seeks to expose and deconstruct.

While Shakespeare inflationarily uses various forms of the term 'monster' when referring to Caliban in *The Tempest*, it appears only twice in *Macbeth*. Nevertheless, the performance history of Lady Macbeth and the witches evokes a strong association with monstrosity. This essay follows the proposition that "the body in play bears continuous meaning onstage, and always exceeds the play text it inhabits" (Rutter xiii), as well as Butler's premise that

gender is a performance. I will use Cohen's theory to illustrate the sexualising and othering strategies that support misogynist representations of Lady Macbeth and the witches. This article covers two 2018 productions of *Macbeth* starting with the live recording of the performance from the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) directed by Polly Findlay. Then, I will discuss Kit Monkman's "radical new adaptation," which claims to "amplify[] the theatrical context of the original whilst creating truly innovative and thrilling cinematic vistas."

The Royal Shakespeare Company's *Macbeth* (2019)

Polly Findlay's production of *Macbeth* has a modern approach to the play, the setting being the foyer of a spartan public building with a glazed balustrade that allows characters to observe and be observed by one another. In the centre of the stage is a digital clock whose red digits start to count down from the moment Duncan is murdered until Macbeth's own death, whereby time becomes the leitmotif of the play. The casting of Niamh Cusack as Lady Macbeth surprised critics, who describe her as "unusually likeable if scamperingly neurotic" (Cavendish) and invested "with a febrile energy" (Billington). Even more unconventional is the portrayal of the three witches as young girls, described as "a sinister parody of motherhood" (Cavendish) and dismissed as a horror film trope that

makes "the witches' ominous words go for little" (Billington).

Seated on the floor in a triangle, the witches open the play. Each of the young girls is dressed in red pyjamas and fleece socks, clutching a baby doll. Their artificially distorted voices form an eerie echo, while dissonant sound effects stress the impact of their words. During the "fair is foul, and foul is fair" couplet (*Mac*.1.1.9-10), they stand up and throw the dolls on the ground before exiting the stage hastily. Throughout the production, they reappear as scene shifters who move props onstage, establishing their metadramatic power over the outcome of the story.

In the third scene of Act 1, the witches approach Macbeth speaking and moving simultaneously. For the sake of casting, Banquo's lines are cut to omit "You seem to understand me, / By each at once her choppy finger laying / Upon her skinny lips. You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.42-47). Moreover, the girls giggle at Macbeth's confusion about the prophecy with childlike glee that forms a harsh contrast to the original text, where they are referred to as "hags" (4.1.47, 4.1.114), a term defined by the *OED* as "an ugly, repulsive old woman: often with implication of viciousness or maliciousness." Old age in women often aroused suspicion in Jacobean contemporaries as it discards the

feminine traits that render women ‘useful’ to patriarchy: old women have passed the age of nobility and fertility, are often widowed, and thereby defy male control. In the RSC production, this association is reversed. The young girls are not yet fertile, not yet marriageable and still they wield power over the men of the play. The production’s obsession with the countdown that is reset at the end of the play, moreover, suggests that the witches are stuck in a time lapse, forever caught in their state of ‘imperfect’ femininity.

As mentioned by critics, the witches’ representation as children is a common trope in horror films. Dominic Lennard argues that “horror’s persistent representation of children with the means to resist adult power has made the iconography of childish fun ironically synonymous with adult fear” and is “related to the implied presence of the child as an undesirable, active subject—rather than the subject of ideology impressed upon it by adults” (134). Thus, the witches’ subversive power comes from the adult fear that children are not controllable and do not invoke their moral code. Indeed, the sisters seem to have no empathy with the baby dolls that they constantly carry with them, alternating between caring and cruel gestures towards the props. When Macbeth confronts the Weird Sisters in Act 4, they sing the “double, double, toil and trouble” rhyme as a children’s lullaby

(4.1.10–11), cradling the dolls lovingly. In between, however, they hold the dolls by their arms, letting them dangle carelessly around their knees and even throw them to the ground. Thus, the lack of motherly compassion and child-like innocence renders the witches monstrous. Eventually, “monsters are our children” and “ask us why we created them” (Cohen 20). The young girls, witches or not, are a mere product of our society and ask the audience to re-evaluate their assumptions on gender and infancy.

With regard to the representation of Lady Macbeth, Niamh Cusack’s portrayal is unusual as she plays a middle-aged wife who is selflessly rooting for her husband’s success. When she enters the stage towards the end of Act 1, her joy at the prophecy seems genuine and the lines “Hie thee hither, / that I may pour my spirits in thine ear” (1.5.25–26) are nothing but well-meaning. Even her “unsex me” speech (1.5.40–54) shows her kneeling humbly on an empty stage, cautiously asking for those murdering ministers to take her milk for gall. Before Lady Macbeth receives Duncan as her guest with a beaming smile, she cordially hugs Banquo and his son, both of whom appear to like her. One cannot help but wonder whether this Lady Macbeth gets more than she bargained for, as her uneasy gestures convey a sense of insecurity throughout the play.

Lady Macbeth's accidental 'wickedness' plays into King James I.'s assumptions about witches, published in his *Daemonologie*, a dialogical text listing all kinds of devil worship. He replies to the question why there are more female than male witches as follows:

The reason is easie, for as that sexe is frailer then man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Deuill, as was ouer well proued to be true, by the Serpents deceiuing of Eua at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe sensine. (35)

According to James, women are more likely to be "entrapped" by the devil for they are prone to seduction of any kind. The misogynistic attitude that women lack constancy of character resembles Hamlet's accusation of Gertrude—"Frailty, thy name is Woman" (*Ham.* 1.2.146)—and suggests that Lady Macbeth is easily corruptible by 'wickedness' as well.

Furthermore, Cusack's erratic performance plays into Lady Macbeth's childlessness that is repeatedly stressed throughout the production. When she confronts Macbeth with her plan to kill Duncan and he tells her to "bring forth men-children only" (*Mac.* 1.7.73), she sinks into his arms and starts to cry. Indeed, on a stage where the witches are played by children and Macduff carries his newborn in a baby sling around his chest, Lady Macbeth's childlessness becomes an all but subtle issue. Carol Chillington Rutter reads Lady Macbeth's apparent inability to have children as

"another form of infanticide, rendering Macbeth's patrilineal future non-existent" (85). Her inability to carry on Macbeth's bloodline is embodied by the red countdown on the wall that represents the literal ticking of her biological clock. Lady Macbeth's time to have children is running out and with it the allegiance to her husband, who shames her for the "barren sceptre" she placed in his grip (3.1.160–61). Her lack of mothering ultimately results in her othering: both the loss of Macbeth's patrilineage and the unfulfilled role of motherhood accumulate in her character to embody early modern patriarchal fears. However, Lady Macbeth also represents contemporary anxieties about motherhood in a society that both limits reproductive rights and criticises the choice not to have children. Like a monster, this "unusually likable" (Cavendish) Lady Macbeth breaks with the discourse of misogynist representation and asks us why we expect her to be unlikable in the first place.

Kit Monkman's *Macbeth* (2018)

Kit Monkman's adaption of *Macbeth* was filmed in front of a green screen, presenting the actors in a stage-like space that utilises minimal set design. Instead, the audience is led by deconstructing camera movements that reveal the stage's construction as a globe. The play text is cut drastically and yet the film is about two hours long, its textual recesses filled with heavy silence.

Most critics applaud the adaptation's visual artistry, but all of them stress Akiya Henry's performance "as a fierce and formidable Lady Macbeth" (Felperin). Moreover, "the added dimension of a real sexual charge to the power play between Macbeth and his wife" (Beasley) is mentioned *bar none*. Several reviews thus conclude that "the film is a timely and deeply compelling intervention in the screen history of Shakespeare" (Findlay and Wray).

As stressed by various critics, the Macbeths' relationship is sexually charged. The physical aspect of the young couple's marriage is essential to Lady Macbeth's character, whose highly sexualised representation provides a new meaning to the "unsex me" speech. Her shortened monologue—the last eight lines are cut—is spoken calmly, yet intensely as a voiceover to choral music and is followed by the couple's passionate reunion. The dialogue of 1.5 is exchanged between heated kisses, establishing Lady Macbeth as an irresistible seductress. Underlining her instructive words "bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue" (1.5.64-65) she leads his hand to her breast and kisses him, before he abruptly turns her around, dominantly holding her hands over her head. Here, the process of 'unsexing' seems to stand in stark contrast to the sex scene enacted on screen.

Although the uncensored portrayal of female sexuality can be empowering, the sexualised performance is also problematic. When Macbeth is watching the banquet from afar, the audience becomes complicit in the voyeuristic gaze on Lady Macbeth, who is offensively flirting with Duncan. This reproduces the misogynist assumption that women use their 'feminine wiles' to corrupt and manipulate men. While Duncan is completely taken in by her charms, the dramatic irony of the situation shows her flirtation as the ruthless exploitation of the king's trust. Cohen remarks that monsters embody "sexual practices that must not be committed, or that may be committed only through the body of the monster" (14). Additionally, King James insinuates that witches engage in 'deviant' sexual practices with the devil: "Witches oft times confesses not only his [the devil's] conueening in the Church with them, but his occupying of the Pulpit: Yea, their forme of adoration, to be the kissing of his hinder partes" (31). Stephanie Irene Spoto confirms that "promiscuity was perhaps the most dangerous and subversive activity for women to engage in during the witch-hunts, as the most common attribute in portrayals of witches is their exaggerated sexuality, and perhaps more dangerously, their power over male-sexuality" (58). Lady Macbeth's sexual openness, thus, could be equated with monstrosity—a notion that is still present in Western societies today and often takes the form of 'slut

shaming.’ Additionally, Cohen argues that “the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint” (17). As much as Lady Macbeth’s self-determined sexuality intimidates the men in the play, it also attracts and threatens to consume them.

Furthermore, the concurrence of gender, sexuality and race brings another nuance to the performance. In popular culture, black women are often portrayed as exotic and sexually aggressive. This filmic convention and the tradition of demonising Lady Macbeth come together in Monkman’s directing of the character. Lady Macbeth’s call for unsexing, then, could be read as a metadramatic request for being ‘un-sexualised’ by the (white) men surrounding her. After all, the leading witch and Lady Macbeth are the only black female characters in the adaptation, which indicates a correlation between race, gender and otherness.

Eventually, the monstrous objectification of Lady Macbeth’s body peaks in her suicide. Having thrown herself from the banister, her sprawled out body is zoomed in on from an aerial perspective. While her face remains in the shadows, she blends in with the pool of blood around her, the black feathers of her costume widely scattered. Mauro Spicci observes that “*Macbeth* revolves around the horrible sight of profaned human bodies” (20), whose “blood is always

outside of the body, profanely manipulated, obsessively shown, made visible, looked at, and touched by alien hands” (25). By showing her corpse, Monkman attempts to match the alleged monstrosity of Lady Macbeth’s character to her now visibly disfigured body.

Surprisingly, both productions of *Macbeth* use entirely different ‘monsterising’ strategies to present the Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth. While the witches in the RSC production embody premature womanhood that challenges adult perceptions of children, Lady Macbeth is portrayed as a childless woman struggling to find her place in a society that revolves around parenthood. Her inability to have (male) children embodies the fear of patrilineal extinction and marks her as the monstrous Other. Monkman’s Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, is heavily exoticised and sexualised. Her promiscuous behaviour is presented through a voyeuristic gaze that treats her naked figure with the same curiosity as her dead body. With her physical integrity destroyed, Lady Macbeth’s body becomes monstrous, yet beautiful—both repelling and attracting. Eventually, Shakespeare’s texts entail a plenitude of monsterising, misogynist discourses and it is important to engage with the problematic assumptions of the play texts before loading them with modern assumptions about gender and otherness on stage. After all, performance is a powerful means of represen-

tation that ought to be exercised carefully, especially regarding the intersectionality of race, gender and sexuality. Further discussion could centre around the question of how problematic gender

discourses can be adapted and subverted on stage for contemporary audiences without sexualising, victimising and othering femininity.

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