

“ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE”
Identity, Desire, and Theater in *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English

WILLIAMS COLLEGE
Williamstown, Massachusetts
April 19th, 2016

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a great deal of thanks to Professor Chris Pye, without whom this thesis likely would not have been possible and unquestionably would not have been as rewarding. I am immensely grateful for his thoughtful feedback, valuable guidance, and unending support, as well as his willingness to both challenge and encourage me at every turn.

I would also like to thank my friends for letting me ramble to them about Shakespeare and for always believing in me, even—and especially—when I doubted myself.

And finally, to my parents and brother, who inspire me and whose support means more to me than I can express: thank you for everything.

INTRODUCTION: THE WORLD ON THE STAGE

The Renaissance was a time marked by a fascination with subjectivity and inner life. Public laws and social norms were intimately linked to the personal, interior sphere and conceptions of self. Primogeniture weighed on relationships between brothers and between fathers and sons;¹ official and unwritten rules requiring clothing to align with class and gender pervaded individual choices and understandings of gender (and reflected the lack of scientific understanding of sexual difference);² there were even laws that regulated public lamentation.³ Of course, the exchange between these external social structures and rules and the inner world did not flow in only one direction. As Regina Schwartz writes, “to the extent that social and economic ‘necessities’ are expressions of inner impulses, conflicts, desires, and expectations, the external landscape changes in response to the internal one.”⁴ The public depended on the private just as the private was shaped by the public, and landing crucially in the midst of this back-and-forth between inner and outer worlds was the theater.

At every theater performance, the private and public met on stage. Entire private realms and intimate details of inner lives—even internal thoughts—were put on display in perhaps the most public setting possible, a setting intended for performance and spectacle. The theater enabled anyone to view the private in a fundamentally public light: a person could go and watch anything from the love entanglements and foolish antics of comedy to the often profoundly personal loss and pain of tragedy performed right in front of them. Audiences witnessed hushed

¹ Louis Adrian Montrose, “‘The Place of a Brother’ in *As You Like It*: Social Process and Comic Form,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32.1 (1981).

² Jean E. Howard, “Crossdressing, the Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39.4 (1988).

³ Regina Schwartz with Valeria Finucci, “Worlds Within and Without,” *Desire in the Renaissance: Psychoanalysis and Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5

conversations and impassioned soliloquys, secret romances and clandestine murders. Plays built entire inner worlds just so that people—audiences—could look into them.

But the theater did more than lend a space for private and public to meet: it radically blurred the distinction between the two. For one thing, the rules seemingly meant to carefully regulate private identities were significantly disrupted at the theater. People of all classes attended plays and, importantly, women could go unaccompanied by male companions, free to be “gadding about outside the walls of their own houses, spending money on a new consumer pleasure, allowing themselves to become a spectacle of the male gaze.”⁵ And these norms were also dismantled on the stage, where cross-dressing was expected and actors adopted identities that could differ drastically, in ways such as class and gender, from their own.

On the stage itself, concerns of both private and public spheres were mirrored in performance. Plays grappled with issues of inheritance, cross-dressing, homoerotic desire, and domestic structures, to name a few. Bringing these specific concerns of viewers to the stage, the theater’s constructed inner worlds became more complicated, more personal. Audiences saw their own problems and anxieties acted out in public, and it became difficult to step back and point to the drama as merely a public representation of some private yet disconnected plot. The inner worlds made public by the stage were similar to the actual inner worlds of the audience members. As members of the audience saw certain concerns of their own private life bared to the public (even if they were private concerns shared by nearly everyone in that public), they could not so easily distinguish between the inner, non-theatrical and outer, theatrical realms.

William Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* is a play that is crucially about—and even enacts—concerns of overlapping inner/outer realms and questions of identity: the story hinges upon familial structures disturbed through the problems of primogeniture and involves a cross-

⁵ Howard, “Crossdressing,” 439.

dressing heroine who woos the man she loves while disguised also as a man. Our heroine, Rosalind, takes on the male identity Ganymede—a name adopted from Greek mythology and that often stands as a symbol for homosexual desire. In a multitude of ways—through Rosalind’s (and other characters’) roleplaying within the drama of the play and through characters’ shifting, mixed up desires for the “wrong” people, to name a few—this ostensibly light, pastoral comedy disrupts understandings of gender and desire, of identity and the stability of the self.

On a seemingly very different note, *Macbeth* less obviously but perhaps even more crucially engages the relationship between inner and outer worlds. Despite being one of Shakespeare’s shorter plays, *Macbeth* generates an impressively complex and haunting world populated by psychologically fascinating characters. While most clearly about ambition and its consequences, the play also centers on questions of gender and identity, albeit in a much more violent and destructive way than in *As You Like It*. Lady Macbeth—parallel to Rosalind as the principal female character—does engage in a kind of roleplaying as well, but rather than adopt something like the role of a boy living temporarily in a charming woods, she transforms herself into a cruel and threateningly pervasive being. And no longer is it a lighthearted fluidity of self with love or marriage or a gender identity most obviously at stake; Lady Macbeth’s reshaping of identity has implications for the more radical boundaries between creation and destruction, being and ultimate absence. More significantly, I also want to suggest that in destabilizing these boundaries, *As You Like It* and especially *Macbeth* suggest an intimate relation between identity, desire, and theater that has major implications for the origin and constituting of self.

In this thesis I will explore both the similar and ultimately distinct ways *As You Like It* and *Macbeth* formulate and disrupt the realms and boundaries of inner and outer worlds. In my first chapter I will examine the undoing of boundaries in *As You Like It*, focusing primarily on

the ways Rosalind's roleplaying unsettles the stability of gender and consequently the relationship between play and audience, fiction and reality. I will also suggest that Rosalind attains a paradoxical consciousness or "knowingness" of the structures of her fictional world through her roleplaying, which allows her to maintain her fluid identity and desire through the end of the play. Drawing on a psychoanalytic approach, specifically the work of Jacques Lacan, to help illuminate and understand the complicated interplay between Orlando and Rosalind-as-Ganymede, I will evaluate the structures of desire in the play. Finally, I will examine closure and the function of the character Hymen in the play's ending, noting the ways the play and characters resist a rigid, closed-off conclusion.

In my second chapter, I will turn to *Macbeth* and analyze the ways it renders the distinction between interior and exterior even more specious than does *As You Like It*. Studying the formidable Lady Macbeth, I will examine the way she channels a threatening and possessing power through a complex reconstituting of her identity into one that eliminates boundaries (for example, the boundaries within categories of gender and sexuality). I will point to differences between Lady Macbeth and Rosalind to highlight *Macbeth's* more radical dissolution of boundaries and implications for the origins of identity. Additionally, I will draw out the way Lady Macbeth reaches the uncanny height of her power (or rather, the power inhabiting her) during her sleepwalking scene, disrupting inner/outer boundaries as well as temporality. Turning to A. C. Bradley's critical response to Lady Macbeth, I will analyze the way she tangibly and powerfully permeates the "real" world outside the play. Finally, I will consider the implications of Lady Macbeth's death—particularly in contrast with Macbeth's death—and her lingering power even in absence.

Though the historical context of these plays is important and helpful for understanding the various forces at work in them, the issues they address are relevant outside of their original historical setting (and in fact are still hugely significant). Despite differences in Renaissance and modern-day theater, the fundamental role of audience members as spectators has remained consistent. Thus, I am interested in analyzing the plays as texts taken largely independently of their historical context while still considering and evaluating the crucial dynamic between audience and play. In this way I will explore the more universal implications of these plays for a general audience or reader. When we see these plays today, our experience might not be so entirely different from original, English Renaissance audiences. Just as members of those original audiences would have arrived at the theater, eager for a peek into some new, yet-to-be-discovered fictional inner life on stage, we, too, come to these plays hoping to be transported, if only temporarily, to a different world. And, also just like the original audiences, we do not anticipate being so *radically* transported, our whole world at least momentarily destabilized, and our understanding of what constitutes identity fundamentally altered.

But even looking at the plays without engaging directly with historical context tells us something about history. History is, of course, a matter of stories. Though the story of the Renaissance differs from our story, the unsettling of boundaries in the plays, including temporal ones in *Macbeth*, poses even more fundamental questions about the way we try to locate ourselves securely “in” history. These plays suggest that such locating is perhaps not possible, that we cannot so simply draw out the relationship between the Renaissance “story” and our “story” or distance ourselves from those original audiences, and that perhaps recognizing our condition as temporal beings means experiencing that inability to situate ourselves in a secure relation to history.

I.
“IF I WERE A WOMAN”: LOSING BOUNDARIES IN *AS YOU LIKE IT*

As Regina Schwartz explains in “Worlds Within and Without,” both Renaissance literature and psychoanalysis focus heavily on the intersections between “inner life” and the outside or external world. Schwartz writes, “both the literature of psychoanalysis and Renaissance literature are testimony to how specious that distinction between inner and outer worlds is, embracing, as they do, a continuum between the psychological, social, economic, scientific, and physical realms.”⁶ One way to examine these “fluid boundaries between the inner and the outer” is through “the sexual and gender instability of the early modern period.”⁷ Where better to examine the sexual and gender instability of this period than in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, a play centered upon cross dressing, confused romantic entanglements, and shifting desire? Moreover, this play is explicitly interested in the distinction, or lack thereof, between the internal and external. In theater, the inner and outer worlds align with the fictional world of the play and the seemingly separate, external reality of the audience.⁸ *As You Like It* questions the status of boundaries between these realms. Indeed, beyond merely using gender instability as an indicator of boundary fluidity, the play suggests these two ideas cannot be separated from each other, that questioning the stability of gender necessarily brings into question the status of boundaries as such.

The fluidity of identities and boundaries in the play begins when Rosalind and her cousin Celia flee to Arden and the order of their world is disrupted—even eradicated—entirely. More

⁶ Schwartz, “Worlds Within,” 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸ This alignment could also be formulated the opposite way, which is closer to how it’s figured in the introduction: inner world aligned with the individuals watching the play and outer world aligned with the performed, public spectacle of the play. This chapter will use the inner/play, outer/audience mode, though this ambiguity in even naming the categories provides some further evidence for their inseparability.

specifically, when Rosalind dons her male costume, calling herself Ganymede, she makes possible entirely new understandings of gender fluidity and expressions of desire. This role-playing, which is just one of the ways that the play seems conscious of the fact that it is a play, also illuminates an interest in the relationship between inner and outer worlds. Not only do Rosalind and Celia take on disguises just as the actors disguise themselves as the characters, but Rosalind also plays the “role” of herself with Orlando when she is disguised as Ganymede, and, most notably, she speaks directly to the audience in the epilogue, thus seeming to inhabit the world of the play and the “real” world simultaneously.

The play is set in two locations that parallel this seeming dichotomy between fictional inner world and “real” outer world: the Forest of Arden and the court. Some critics have argued that the play’s movement between these two different worlds—the escape to Arden and the ultimate implied return to the structured court—more firmly delineates the distinction between these different realms. C.L. Barber describes the play’s primary forest setting as “a region defined by an attitude of liberty from ordinary limitations, a festive place where the folly of romance can have its day.”⁹ But, he explains that the natural world of Arden is only a temporary respite—a holiday—from the court, citing some of Rosalind’s lines:

Say a day without the ‘ever.’ No, no, Orlando;
men are April when they woo, December when they
wed. Maids are May when they are maids, but the sky
changes when they are wives.¹⁰

⁹ C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Its Relation to Social Custom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 253.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Alan Brissenden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.1.133-136.

He writes, “To turn on passionate experience and identify it with the holiday moment, as Rosalind does in insisting that the sky will change, puts the moment in perspective with life as a whole... But the release of that one day was understood to be a temporary license, a ‘misrule’ which implied rule, so that the acceptance of nature was qualified.”¹¹

Indeed, the stark contrast between the free and festive time in Arden and the abrupt restructuring through marriage at the play’s end underscores the seeming division between these worlds. However, the play’s ending denies any sort of absolute separation from Arden and from the fluidity of identity and desire it allows. In “The Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy,” Valerie Traub claims that the homoeroticism in the play can “transcend binary oppositions,” and she writes, “Orlando’s effusion of desire toward [Rosalind/Ganymede] prevents the stable reinstitution of heterosexuality, upon which the marriage plot depends... The proceedings of Hymen that conclude the play ... enact only an ambivalent closure.”¹² This “effusion of desire” that is both a cause and subsequent result of non-closure is indicative of more than just an unsettling of sexuality: it reflects the broader loss of boundaries between inner and outer worlds.

Rosalind begins the epilogue by saying, “It is not the fashion to see the / lady the epilogue,” apparently identifying herself as the female Rosalind and distinguishing herself from her male role as Ganymede.¹³ But the character/actor then goes on to say, “If I / were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had / beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and / breaths that I defied not,” suggesting that she, the character of Rosalind, is in reality a male actor who is merely playing the character of a woman.¹⁴ And yet, this entire “reveal” of true gender is, of course, scripted, merely a lure from within a fiction to viewers looking for some secure

¹¹ Barber, *Shakespeare’s Festive Comedy*, 9.

¹² Valerie Traub, “The Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy,” *Shakespeare, Feminism, and Gender*, ed. Kate Chedgozy (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 122-123.

¹³ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Epilogue 1-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Epilogue 16-19.

grounding: As audience members who have seen this Rosalind character in so many different roles—as Rosalind, Ganymede, Ganymede-as-Rosalind—we have gotten used to trying to figure out who we are seeing at any given point in the play, and so we try to identify precisely who we see in this final moment. We are denied any easy or sure identification. In this moment of ambiguity, this distinction, or lack thereof, between Rosalind the fictional character (along with her other roles) and the “real” male actor playing Rosalind mirrors a similar relationship between reality and fiction that exists throughout the play. The more forcefully the play tries to draw distinctions between reality and fiction (through certain characters’ actions and elements of the plot), the more inseparable the two become and, further, the more we as members of the audience become unable to distinguish ourselves from the world of the play.

Hymen, the god of marriage, is a character who demonstrates this complicated relationship between fiction and reality and attempts to separate the two. Through the nature of this character, his language, and his actions, we see how an attempt to escape fiction or distinguish oneself as entirely separate from it ultimately results in becoming further inscribed in that same fictional world. Hymen is ostensibly an entirely “external” character; he enters the play in the last scene and has no place in its plot or structure besides attempting to impose order through the four marriages that occur just before the play’s end. It would seem that he occupies a position completely outside of the world of the play, particularly as a figure that exists before and without the play, grounded in Greek mythology. His attempt to restore order to the characters’ lives through marriage, which would mark their reentrance into the reality of society from the non-reality of Arden, feels like a forced conclusion, further demonstrating his push against the fictional world within the play. And yet, out of all the characters, Hymen is at the same time the most purely fictitious. While all the characters are fictional within the greater

world (i.e. the world outside the play), Hymen is on some level fictional within the play as well—he is a god and is a mythic, even magical figure in an essentially naturalistic drama. There are no other characters in the play like Hymen in this way, and he is distinguished by his status as a god, which both seems to remove him entirely from the fiction of the play and yet designates him as inherently the most fictitious in his role as a *deus ex machina*.

Similarly to Hymen, Rosalind occupies a space that seems somehow both external and interior to the play. Of all the characters, Rosalind has the most fluid relationship to role-playing and, as a result, the most fluid identity in the play. She is the only character who gets to play a different gender, and yet she is also the character who, in many ways, is the most entrenched in the structures of desire, participating in these structures in many ways—as a mirror for Celia's identity and desire, as an object of desire for Orlando (both as Rosalind and as Ganymede), as an object of desire for Phoebe (as Ganymede), and through her desire for Orlando, which is complicated by her position as her own challenger for Orlando's love. And though she is so involved in these structures of desire, she also has the unique ability to step partially out of these structures—to know them *as* structures—through her fluid identity. For much of *As You Like It*, Rosalind's knowingness seems to extend only to her role-playing with Orlando—an understanding of the fiction of Arden and the structures of desire—and not to the status of *As You Like It* as a play, a fiction. However, the lines she delivers in the epilogue extend her sense of knowledge to the structure of the play (as a play) itself. Again, paradoxically, she is the most knowing as well as the most embedded in the fiction. As Ganymede, she acts as her own rival for Orlando's love and exists in a position that is at once inside and outside the play, lending her an awareness both of the structures she exists within and of her inability to break out of these structures.

A complex connection between distance and desire is evident in Rosalind's relationships with the other characters. When the shepherd Corin tells Rosalind-as-Ganymede of Silvius's unrequited love for Phoebe, offering to bring her to them, Rosalind responds, "O come, let us remove. / The sight of lovers feedeth those in love."¹⁵ To watch Silvius and Phoebe from a distance will "feedeth" Rosalind-as-Ganymede's own separate desire for Orlando. And yet, though her impulse is to watch, to remain separate, she acknowledges that her own distancing from the other characters will result in a drawing in: "Bring us to this sight, and you shall say / I'll prove a busy actor in their play."¹⁶ Indeed, Rosalind-as-Ganymede becomes involved in their "play" of love precisely because of her/his distance, with Phoebe quickly falling in love with Rosalind-as-Ganymede seemingly *because* of her/his lack of desire for Phoebe. As Rosalind-as-Ganymede says, "she'll fall in love with my anger."¹⁷ Distance from a play of love not only fuels desire for Rosalind, but it generates new desire in Phoebe, entangling her in this play of love, in which she initially wanted no part.

Jacques Lacan's accounts of desire can illuminate this relationship between distance and desire as well as the provide a language for describing the structures of desire in the play more generally. Specifically, we can turn to Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage," which captures the idea, explained by Jacqueline Rose in her insightful introduction to Lacan's *Feminine Sexuality*, that a "child's mirror image [is] the model and basis for its future identifications."¹⁸ This concept of the "mirror stage" suggests that a child's recognition of its own image in a mirror (or its mirror as represented through its mother) is the child's first way of recognizing its own sense of identity. And yet Lacan writes, "this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.4.51-52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.4.53-54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.5.68.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Rose, "Introduction – II" to *Feminine Sexuality*, by Jacques Lacan, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, translated by Jacqueline Rose (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), 30.

determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming"¹⁹—in other words, as Rose puts it, this same mirror image that creates identity for the child also “divides its identity into two” and renders the child dependent on the mirror image outside of itself, an “other,” for its own identity.²⁰ Lacan argues that there must be an interruption in this duality, a breaking up of this mirrored relationship, in order for desire to begin. He talks about this mirroring and interruption in terms of the relationship between child, mother, and father, where the mother acts as the mirror for the child and the father acts as the “third term,” or the interruption in the mirrored relationship. Rose writes, “The duality of the relation between mother and child must be broken, just as the analytic relation must be thrown onto the axis of desire.”²¹ There must be, in a sense there must always have been, a third person, some interloper, who breaks up a mirrored relationship and initiates desire for the original two members of the relationship.

After this break in the mirrored relationship, once the child has recognized its mother as separate from itself, it experiences loss for the first time. It is this loss (a distance between the desirer and object of desire) that creates a space for desire, as desire is generated by loss or by a lack of the desired object; the mother is no longer merely a mirror for the child but has a self and desires that are independent of the child. Thus, the child loses the mother as a complete mirror for its identity—it realizes that the mother is separate from itself and that it lacks the full attention of the mother—and so the child first experiences desire. In this way, this disruption of the mirror is arguably significant for the stability of individual identity as well, as it allows the

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function,” *Écrits*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 76.

²⁰ Rose, “Introduction,” 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

child—or any member of some original duality—to recognize its mirror image figure as something other than self—to recognize it as a mirror at all—allowing the identity of the “I” to become independently formed.

The Rosalind/Orlando relationship initially fits into this structure of mirrored duality. Rosalind and Orlando fall in love abruptly, with their love for each other unchallenged and reflected equally between the two of them. This mirrored structure, a structure of love where the object of desire completes the self, leaves them in a state without any loss and so, presumably, out of touch with the grounds of their own desire. And this desire is rooted almost entirely in a familial identification: Rosalind first loves Orlando because her father, Duke Senior, loved his father, Sir Rowland de Boys. Upon learning that Orlando is the son of Sir Rowland, Rosalind says,

My father loved Sir Rowland as his soul,
 And all the world was of my father’s mind.
 Had I before known this young man his son
 I should have given him tears unto entreaties
 Ere he should thus have ventured.²²

Celia even questions the foundedness of Rosalind’s desire. When Rosalind explains her love for Orlando by saying, “The Duke my father loved his father dearly,” Celia (quite reasonably) responds with skepticism, “Doth it therefore ensue that you should love his son / dearly?”²³

However, soon after they first meet, both Rosalind and Orlando are exiled and consequently separated from each other; Rosalind assumes the role of Ganymede, meets Orlando in Arden, and, rather than revealing herself as Rosalind, interacts with Orlando in this new role

²² Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 1.2.219-223.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1.3.28-30.

and ultimately acts as the “third term” or intercessor in her own relationship with Orlando. Orlando and Ganymede spend time together in the forest, with Orlando “wooing” Ganymede. Though this wooing occurs under the pretense that it will help Orlando get over his love for Rosalind, the two characters take it quite seriously. Ultimately, Orlando and Ganymede even undergo a mock marriage ceremony—in fact, when Ganymede suggests that Celia “marry” them, Orlando responds with seeming enthusiasm, saying, “Pray thee, marry us.”²⁴ Traub describes this culmination of the characters’ desires: “In so far as ritual was still popularly believed to be imbued with sacred or magical power, the fact that Orlando does not hesitate, but eagerly responds in the precise form of the Anglican marriage ceremony—‘I take thee, Rosalind, for wife’ (4.1.122)—suggests the degree to which the play legitimizes the multiple desires it represents.”²⁵

At moments like this one, Orlando’s love for Ganymede seems genuine, not merely acted. In some ways, it feels more founded than his love for Rosalind—no longer just familial-based—as he has spent a great deal more time with Ganymede than with Rosalind. Because of this realistic role-play, Ganymede functions as an interruption in the Orlando/Rosalind relationship, disrupting Orlando’s complete love for Rosalind and allowing Rosalind (as Ganymede) and Orlando to develop a seemingly more grounded desire for each other, and yet one paradoxically “grounded” in fiction. However, Ganymede is clearly no ordinary “third” member or intercessor in a duality—Ganymede/Rosalind is a part of the duality as well as the cause of the break in that duality. Because of this, Rosalind is in a fairly remarkable position. She is her own rival, and she disrupts her own relationship, thus creating the space for her own desire. More generally, because of this unique position, she can exist in between boundaries,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.1.115.

²⁵ Traub, “Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy,” 127.

recognizing the structures of desire that she is inescapably a part of. More than any other character, she has an understanding of her own position and of her participation in her relationships with others.

Rosalind and Hymen, then, both participate and observe, occupying a space that is at once inside and outside the play. However, Rosalind's relationship to the structures of the play is distinct from Hymen's in that she knows that she is a part of these fictional structures and also realizes that she cannot completely escape them, as Hymen attempts to do. Rather, for most of the play, she seems content to occupy this paradoxical space, remaining in-between—the most secure in this position of insecurity—disguised as the character Ganymede who simultaneously pretends to be Rosalind. And yet, Rosalind is ultimately drawn back into the “fiction” of the play just as Hymen is fully recaptured in the play as the most fictional character. Though she is the most knowing character, her knowingness is just that—a *knowledge* of her entrapment in the play—and it does not actually grant her any true control over the plot. Thus, it is precisely when Rosalind attempts to assert control, to step further out of the play's structures and resolve the ambiguity of her position, that she begins to lose her footing in her previously (un)stable, between-boundaries position and is ultimately reminded of her inability to actually escape these structures. Just as Rosalind-as-Ganymede is pulled into Phoebe and Silvius's play of love because she is separate from it, and just as Phoebe becomes entangled by a desire for Ganymede because of Ganymede's distance from her, Rosalind's efforts to move away from a position of ambiguity draw her in even further.

Rosalind's momentary loss of fluidity and stability of self is most apparent in the scene where Oliver describes his rescue by Orlando. Orlando has saved a sleeping Oliver from a lioness, incurring injury to himself and allowing the two brothers to reconcile their former

differences. Oliver describes the scene of his rescue by Orlando:

Under an old oak, whose boughs were mossed with age
 And high top bald with dry antiquity,
 A wretched, ragged man, o'ergrown with hair,
 Lay sleeping on his back. About his neck
 A green and gilded snake had wreathed itself,
 Who with her head, nimble in threats, approached
 The opening of his mouth. But suddenly
 Seeing Orlando, it unlinked itself,
 And with indented glides did slip away.²⁶

And he continues with this story, describing the lioness that lay waiting to attack, only to be stopped by Orlando. In “Female Friends and Fraternal Enemies in *As You Like It*,” William Kerrigan describes and analyzes this scene in terms of the “early mother,” comparing the imagery of an impotent father (the “old oak”) with the “maternal menace” that permeates the scene (the snake, the lioness).²⁷ All this paternal imagery amounts to an overcoming of the maternal conflict that had initiated the sibling rivalry: “In sum, the older brother forgives the younger brother because the younger brother has rescued him.”²⁸ This overcoming, and hence separation from, the mother aligns with the Lacanian idea of the break in the “mirror stage” with the mother allowing the first formation of identity. Indeed, Kerrigan describes how Orlando, as a disruption in Oliver’s mirror stage, allows Oliver’s transformation via recognition of a self that allows independence (and thus forgiveness of Orlando): “it is good to be free of the mother, to

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.3.105-113

²⁷ Williams Kerrigan, “Female Friends and Fraternal Enemies in *As You Like It*,” *Desire in the Renaissance*, ed. Valeria Finucci and Regina Schwartz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 196.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

mourn my losses and become an independent self.”²⁹

Impelled by this reconciliation, Oliver recounts the fantastical story of Orlando’s heroic actions to Rosalind-as-Ganymede and Celia, claiming that Orlando has sent him to deliver a bloody handkerchief to Ganymede as an explanation and a token of his apology for failing to return to Ganymede as he had promised. Oliver first presents Orlando’s bloody napkin to Rosalind-as-Ganymede, to which she merely responds, rather stoically, “What must we understand by this?”³⁰ Oliver then goes on to tell in great detail the story of how Orlando saved him. It is only after the story is over and Oliver has presented the bloody napkin again that Rosalind-as-Ganymede finally reacts and faints. It cannot simply be the sight of the bloody napkin that causes her to faint, as she has already seen it; rather, it is the telling of the story in conjunction with the “reality” of the bloody napkin in front of her that leads her to react so strongly. And once she has reacted in this way—a way that is inconsistent with her role as male and therefore unemotional Ganymede—she quickly brushes off her reaction as very effective acting, saying “a body would / think this was well counterfeited.”³¹ She almost desperately tries to stress this point, telling Oliver that her fainting was merely a “counterfeit” three more times before the scene ends.³²

Interestingly, it is the story, and an outrageously fantastical one at that, involving a serpent and lion (and one that demonstrates Orlando’s commitment to a supposedly acted, “fictional” relationship), rather than simply the reality in front of her that brings about Rosalind’s “real” reaction. The more she has attempted to situate herself outside the boundaries of her reality by entering into a fiction as male, tough-minded Ganymede and removing herself from

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 4.3.94.

³¹ Ibid., 4.3.166-167.

³² Ibid., 4.3.169-183.

her “real” role as female Rosalind—evidenced by her initial lack of reaction to the bloody napkin—the more strongly she gets pulled back into her “reality” as Rosalind—which is clear in her eventual (over)dramatic reaction to Oliver’s story and thus her inability to stay in character as Ganymede. But then her reaction is just that—a drama, an act that would seem consistent with a play or fiction rather than reality—and it is her forced claim to a secure position that is just what makes her vulnerable. In this way, the distinctions between fiction and reality are further blurred.

Hymen’s entrance and apparently necessary role in concluding the comedy—which occur after Rosalind attempts to organize the play’s ending as Ganymede—point to Rosalind’s ultimate lack of control and inability to sufficiently bring about closure. In the final moments of the last scene, Hymen enters the play, saying, “Peace, ho, I bar confusion / ’Tis I must make conclusion / Of these most strange events.”³³ His role of marrying the characters in order to conclude the play seems redundant—Rosalind, as Ganymede, has already done the work of setting up the conclusion, formulating a plan so that the characters will end up paired off in marriage. She says to the other characters, “I have promised to make all this matter even.”³⁴ After reminding them to keep the promises they made to her, she says, again, “from hence I go / To make these doubts all even.”³⁵ However, once she goes “from hence,” rather than coming back and making “these doubts all even” herself, Hymen enters the play.³⁶

After the entrance of Hymen, Rosalind, no longer disguised as Ganymede, takes on a passive role and is presented to her father by Hymen, who says, “Good Duke, receive thy

³³ Ibid., 5.4.120-122.

³⁴ Ibid., 5.4.18.

³⁵ Ibid., 5.4.24-25.

³⁶ Ibid.

daughter; / Hymen from heaven brought her.”³⁷ Despite all of Rosalind’s work to organize the play’s ending, Hymen says, “’Tis *I* must make conclusion” (italics mine), implying that he, and not Rosalind or any other character, must conclude the play.³⁸ Beyond seeming unexpected and unnecessary, Hymen’s abrupt entrance has a forceful quality—he must “*bar* confusion” (italics mine)—which is surprising coming from this supposed figure of fulfillment and union. The order he imposes by pairing off the characters would seem to limit the previous fluidity of the characters’ identities and relationships, implying as it does a more rigid structure.³⁹

Hymen’s entrance occurs immediately after Touchstone gives his speech about the power of the word “if”: “‘if’ is / the only peacemaker,” he says, “much virtue in ‘if.’”⁴⁰ The conditional is a powerful linguistic tool throughout the play and parallels the fluidity of identity and desire in Arden. The word “if” leaves open space for multiple possibilities and, in doing so, also creates space for desire. Desire relies on a lack or an inability to possess something completely; the word “if,” a linguistic structure defined by its uncertainty or indefiniteness, constructs a state of incompleteness, or one that is inherently lacking. Moreover, the completion of the “if” statement is contingent upon some of its possibilities ultimately being ruled out, and this threat of loss or idea of competing possibilities inspires desire as well. As Cynthia Marshall observes, the possibilities of desire depend on “a willingness to sacrifice a sure reality for the linguistic *If* whose powers Touchstone documents late in the play.”⁴¹

Hymen’s arrival seems to be a direct response to Touchstone’s claim that there is “much

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.4.106-107.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.4.121.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.4.120

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.4.97-98

⁴¹ Cynthia Marshall, “Constructions of Negation in *As You Like I*,” *As You Like It*, ed. Leah S. Marcus (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 393.

virtue in ‘if.’”⁴² There is a conflict between closure and the conditional, and so Hymen’s actions attempt to move the play from a state of fluidity to one of fixed structure, which is represented directly by the characters’ transition from an uncertain state of desire to the formal and absolute structure of marriage. In order to drive the characters away from a conditional state and toward a more absolute sense of things, Hymen forcefully attempts to shrink the space of possibility provided by fluidity. In doing so—in driving out possibilities and striving to fix things (relationships, identities) completely—he tries to trap the characters within a single structure, which runs the risk of leaving little room for desire.

The character of Adam demonstrates the destructive nature of Hymen’s imposed structure. Adam, an old and dedicated servant who has promised to follow Orlando “To the last gasp with truth and loyalty,” completely disappears from the play at the end of the second act, and there is no mention of his fate at the end of the play.⁴³ In fact, the other characters—and likely the audience—seem to completely forget about him. Rather than meeting any specifically named fate, such as dying or returning to court, he is forced out of the play altogether, his fate disregarded and unknown—he disappears into oblivion, “sans everything.”⁴⁴ As a man who is old and without anyone to fall in love with or marry, and as someone whose mortality, the ultimate contingency, is clearly highlighted, Adam does not fit into the neat structure of Hymen’s paired-off ending. Perhaps this is why he is altogether forgotten and almost violently expunged from the play—he cannot be fixed in marriage, and any mention of him would only take away from the perfect and rigid conclusion that Hymen attempts to create.

However, just as Hymen appears to be both fully outside the fiction of the play as well as the most interior to the play’s fiction, the fixed structure he imposes on the characters is in fact

⁴² Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 5.4.98.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.3.71.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.7.166.

concurrent with a leaving open of fluid space. Even his own words of supposed conclusion include a conditional statement. He says, “Here’s eight that must take hands / To join in Hymen’s bands, / *If* truth holds true contents” (italics mine).⁴⁵ As Traub writes, “The reinstatement of gender role (and Rosalind’s political subordination under her husband’s rule) is incommensurate with a rigidification of sexuality.”⁴⁶

This simultaneous shrinking and expanding of space is most easily observed in Rosalind. The character of Ganymede is forced out and must disappear completely at the end of the play, and Rosalind gives up much of her power and independence, letting Hymen take over as the seeming controller of the play’s action and entering into a more limited role as the wife of Orlando. As the character who took on the most fluid role in the play—permeating a space both inside and outside of the play’s structure, roleplaying a different gender, and acting as her own rival for Orlando’s love—it makes sense that she is the most obviously pushed back into a rigid structure. When presented to the other characters by Hymen, she says to her father and to Orlando, “To you I give myself, for I am yours.”⁴⁷ She even asserts this twice, once to each man, implying some sense of splitting herself between the men. The two men respond in turn, “you are my daughter” and “you are my Rosalind.”⁴⁸ This exchange emphasizes her loss of power and her return to a structure imposed upon her; she is something to be possessed, divided even, and defined by her relationships to the men rather than by her own identity.

Yet we see that even once Hymen has entered the play and once Rosalind has “given herself” to Duke Senior and Orlando, she continues to use the powerful “if” when she speaks. She addresses Duke Senior, Orlando, and Phoebe: “I’ll have no father if you be not he. / I’ll have

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.4.123-125.

⁴⁶ Traub, “Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy,” 123.

⁴⁷ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 5.4.111.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.4.113-114.

no husband if you be not he, / Nor ne'er wed woman if you be not she."⁴⁹ At this point in the play, Rosalind has revealed herself to be Rosalind; there should no longer any real doubt that Duke Senior is her father, or that she will marry Orlando, or that she will not marry Phoebe. And yet, she still uses the word "if" for these seemingly definite statements, suggesting an even more radical uncertainty at the heart of the "truth." Perhaps even the real is unstable. This continued employment of the conditional suggests that space of possibility she found in Arden, which has created and allowed for her power, desire, and more fluid sense of identity, remains at least somewhat intact up to and beyond the end of the play.

Returning to the epilogue, we more clearly see this preserved fluidity. Rosalind uses the conditional once again: "If it be true that good / wine needs no bush, 'tis true..." and the more striking statement, "If I / were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had / beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and / breaths that I defied not."⁵⁰ She calls attention to her fluid gender and her uncertain position in the play, emphasizing and epitomizing her ability to exist both within and outside of the boundaries of the play by speaking directly to the audience. Not only are Rosalind's gender and identity unclear in the epilogue, but it is also unclear whether or not we can place her within a gender duality or the boundaries of the play at all, as we see her in this moment as the female Rosalind, the male actor who plays her, and maybe even the female-as-male Ganymede all at once.

Rosalind's conditional statement—"If I / were a woman..."—implies that the play has fooled us in some way, that we have come to feel desire for characters who we are not "supposed" to desire.⁵¹ Specifically, the men in the audience must consider that the character of Rosalind, who it is entirely possible they have come to desire in some way, is in reality a male

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.4.227-119.

⁵⁰ Ibid., Epilogue 4-5, 16-19.

⁵¹ Ibid., Epilogue 16-19.

actor (interestingly, this mode of desire parallels the desire that Orlando seems to develop for Rosalind-as-Ganymede when he woos Ganymede as (s)he plays the role of Rosalind: like the audience members, Orlando is aware that he is merely participating in a fiction, and yet he gets caught up in it, he convinces himself to believe in it, and he ultimately cannot distinguish his desires in this fictional, role-played scenario from desires formed in reality). As Traub describes, “the effect of this statement is to highlight the constructedness of gender and the flexibility of erotic attraction at precisely the point when the formal impulse of comedy would be to essentialize and fix both gender and eroticism.”⁵² If the audience members push back against Rosalind’s conditional aim rather than merely laughing at it—as it is presumably intended to be comedic—it implies that they feel threatened by it in some way. To feel threatened by a character in a play, though, indicates a sense of being tied up in the world of the play. If we can recognize the play as merely a play, an entirely fictional world, then we should not become entangled in it, we should not have to push back against it at all.

Indeed, it is, in a way, our own faults that we are tied up like this—Rosalind has done nothing more than say “if I were a woman,” and so it is our own reactions to the possibility of an ambiguous gender, our own impulse to move away from this space of possibility, that trap us within a world that has lost its boundaries. Not only does this moment underscore Rosalind’s simultaneously interior and exterior position, but it also pulls us as members of the audience into the play more deliberately than any other moment in the comedy. Just as we are ready to exit the world of the play at the end of the last scene, and precisely as a result of our desire for such an exit, the epilogue draws us in further by speaking to us directly. As the epilogue demonstrates, we have a difficult time disconnecting from the world of the play even after it has ended, which again points to the possibility that fiction and reality cannot be separated within the play and that

⁵² Traub, “Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy,” 128.

even the boundary between the inner fiction of the play and the outer reality of the world beyond it is radically indeterminate.

I'd suggest that this idea of gender instability as represented in the play, and the necessarily resulting loss of boundaries, has major implications for the (inseparable) world beyond the play. Traub's claim that the epilogue emphasizes gender's constructedness is complicated by the connectedness of fiction and reality; we cannot separate a construction from a "truth," and indeed, the play suggests there may be no difference between the two. Thus, on a larger scale, there is a great deal at stake in the status of boundaries; the line between fiction and that which is beyond fiction delineates history, and so when this line is no longer clear, questions arise about how we produce histories and, consequently, the relation between the historical and the present. We are implicated in these uncertainties as well: When we can no longer differentiate between fiction and non-fiction, it becomes more difficult to differentiate ourselves, our reality, from fiction, and so it also becomes more difficult to situate ourselves in relation to history. What happens, then, in a play where temporality is unsettled even more directly, and where boundaries in general are disrupted without a frame for identifying said boundaries? This is precisely what occurs in *Macbeth*, and I will turn to it now in order to explore this question as well as the effects of the construction of radically unstable identity in the play.

II. “UNSEX ME HERE”: REDEFINING SELF IN *MACBETH*

In *Macbeth*, the play’s relationship to its own status as fiction is not nearly as obvious as that of *As You Like It*. However, the interplay between fiction and reality is in fact a central concern of *Macbeth*, and Michael Fox hints at a possible idea of what this relationship might be in his essay “Like a poor player.” He writes,

Shakespeare in *Macbeth* uses modes of nonrepresentational performance to reveal the actors’ faces behind the mask of their monstrous character. The great myth of the theatre is that we go to see fictions disguised as reality. The truth is that we go to the theatre to see reality disguised as fictions.⁵³

Though perhaps experiencing “reality disguised as fictions” might be our intention as audience members of *Macbeth*, this is not precisely what occurs. Rather than seeing fiction as reality or reality as fiction, with both *Macbeth* and *As You Like It*, we enter into a space in which it is impossible to distinguish between the two.

Though the two plays differ in many ways—most obviously in genre—both engage with ideas of identity, gender, and boundaries in surprisingly similar ways yet with ultimately different consequences. While *As You Like It* is explicitly concerned with—or even about—gender instability and fiction, *Macbeth* is seemingly more contained within its own narrative world, and it less overtly interacts with the “real” realm outside its fiction. Yet, within the world of the play, there is a great deal of focus on gender and sexuality as well as on the distinction (or lack thereof) between a more general inner and outer world. The focus on these ideas is apparent in the frequently gendered and sexual language of the play as well as in the less evident yet still

⁵³ Michael David Fox, “Like a poor player: Audience emotional response, nonrepresentational performance, and the staging of suffering in *Macbeth*,” *Macbeth: New Critical Essays*, ed. Nick Moschovakis (New York: Routledge, 2008), 209.

present interest in the play's status as a play.

In *As You Like It*, the character of Rosalind moves between boundaries of gender, identity, and desire and occupies ostensibly distinct spaces simultaneously in her as role as Ganymede. In *Macbeth*, it is Lady Macbeth who plays the role most similar to Rosalind's, creating and existing in a space of dissolved boundaries. Though Lady Macbeth never speaks to the audience in an explicitly direct address or displays any obvious awareness of the fact that she is a character in a play (as Rosalind does in the epilogue of *As You Like It*), Lady Macbeth, like Rosalind, both attains a unique proximity to the audience and assumes a kind of new identity in the play. Lady Macbeth's intimacy with the audience comes in large part from the nature of the way she speaks. She says a large number of her lines while alone on stage, and nearly one third of her lines are non-dialogic (with "129 lines alone with Macbeth, and a mere 47 lines ... in dialogue with other characters").⁵⁴ Though she may not speak directly to us, it is as if Lady Macbeth is speaking for our benefit, allowing us to overhear her. Fox claims that "from the perspective of close contact with the audience, Lady Macbeth is perhaps the most intimate character that Shakespeare ever created," and that this "close contact" between Lady Macbeth "produces not merely an intimacy with the character, but also with the actor."⁵⁵

However, to say that the intimacy merely allows us to acknowledge both character and actor is an oversimplification of our relationship with Lady Macbeth. Her closeness to the audience also complicates our understanding of her character as merely a fictional figure: the more intimate we feel to her as the play goes on, the less sure we become of her location within (or outside of) the play. Perhaps she is not totally contained in the fiction of the play but also extends, somehow unconsciously, into our world. And as our relationship with this character

⁵⁴ Ibid., 220.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 220, 221.

seems to become more intimate, we are also aware that she, the character of Lady Macbeth, has no conscious awareness of us. When Rosalind translates herself into our world, it is obvious how she does so, acknowledging—directly in the epilogue but also indirectly throughout the play when she mimics her own playacting as Ganymede—the boundary between her world and ours. Lady Macbeth somehow enters into our world without knowing or identifying this transcendence, which leaves us uncertain of exactly which boundaries she is disrupting.

While both Rosalind and Lady Macbeth redefine their own selves throughout the course of the play, there are major differences in their self-transformations and resulting identities. Rosalind's adoption of fluid identity enables her to hold a temporary position of seeming control in Arden, and through this position, she can ultimately recognize and acknowledge her self-loss and lack of true control over her story. It is this acknowledgement that becomes her power. However, it is an acknowledgement that can only occur because there is a space for such self-aware knowledge in *As You Like It*, a space that exists due to the play's recognition of the fact that it is a play (as Rosalind confronts directly in the epilogue). Because of this recognition, we can identify the categories of inside and outside in *As You Like It*, even if that distinction is then made ambiguous by the play. Initially seen as a fictional character existing entirely and exclusively inside the play's imagined world, Rosalind/Ganymede then speaks directly to us, pointing out the boundary between her/his world and ours while simultaneously disrupting any stable sense of said boundary. The sense of literary self-consciousness in *As You Like It* allows us to know the terms of our confusion; we realize that we are losing the footing that separates us and our "real" world from the fictional, acted world of the play.

On the other hand, *Macbeth* lacks the same overt sense of literary self-consciousness—there is no obvious focus on role-playing, no direct acknowledgement of the world as fiction by

any of the characters. The play does not recognize the fact that it is a play, and Lady Macbeth cannot possess the same kind of knowledge that Rosalind gains in *As You Like It*. For Lady Macbeth, there are no apparent structures to move between, and there is no opportunity for the kind of recognition of structures that Rosalind is allowed. Lady Macbeth's loss of self becomes a complete destruction of self rather than a way of realizing her conscious empowerment. This loss impacts us as audience members as well: we are denied the same ability to locate ourselves in relationship to the play. While the literary self-consciousness of *As You Like It* provides a frame for the boundaries of fiction and reality, in *Macbeth*, that frame dissolves. Thus, when we lose our bearings in *Macbeth*, we cannot even tell where we are getting lost—the undoing of boundaries becomes an undoing of our own ability to even locate any such boundaries at all. In some ways then, Lady Macbeth's self-transformation is even more radical than Rosalind's overt change in identity. Thus, the disruptions that Lady Macbeth prompts for the audience are more radical as well.

From this lost space in *Macbeth* emerges a profound equivalence between weakness and power. Lady Macbeth becomes both the most threatening character in the play and the character who has experienced the most complete loss of power. She cannot step back as Rosalind does and recognize the structures she moves between; hence, she is ultimately lost entirely. This absence of dramatic framework affects us as audience members, too: We, like Lady Macbeth, lose our ability to acknowledge our relationship to the structures of the play, as we no longer have the basic framework for this kind of knowing. More generally, the dissolving of boundaries in the tragedy holds more at stake than the similar loss of boundaries in *As You Like It*. While Rosalind is at once inside and outside of her self-consciously literary, fictional world, Lady Macbeth moves fluidly between more ambiguously delineated spaces, spaces that are not so

easily named. In *Macbeth*, the ambiguity of location starts to become about *being* itself: as Lady Macbeth's self is entirely lost within the play and as we similarly lose the ability to separate ourselves from the play's world, we begin to recognize a more intimate if incalculable relation between identity and fiction.

To understand these powerful implications of Lady Macbeth's character, we must trace her development over the course of the play. At first glance, her fate seems fairly uncomplicated: she is reduced from a position of total power at the beginning of the play to one of complete powerlessness at the end as she descends into madness, ranting and walking in her sleep and ultimately dying offstage. Her death is merely reported to us and subsequently seemingly forgotten. However, Lady Macbeth's progression throughout the play is not so simple. Rather than merely losing all power, Lady Macbeth moves toward a version of her own self that is defined by absence as well as an absolute evasion of boundaries, a self-transformation that is simultaneously empowering and destructive.

When the audience first sees Lady Macbeth, she is reading a letter from Macbeth that recounts the strange prophecy he has received from the witches. Her response to this news is in stark contrast to Macbeth's. After the witches deliver their prophecy to Macbeth—saying, “All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!”—Macbeth spends a great deal of time contemplating the implications of this prediction and considering whether or not to act.⁵⁶ In contrast, upon hearing the news, Lady Macbeth does not hesitate. Immediately after reading the letter, she is sure that Macbeth must kill King Duncan, and she also realizes that he will hesitate to do so. She says,

Hie thee hither,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,

⁵⁶ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Signet Classic, 1998), 1.3.50.

And chastise with the valor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round.⁵⁷

When she learns that Duncan is coming to stay at their home that very night, she calls upon “spirits” to transform her so that she may become even more powerful and remain resolute in convincing Macbeth to carry out the murder. This famous soliloquy, similar to Rosalind’s donning of her male Ganymede costume, marks the start of Lady Macbeth’s reimagining of identity in a radical, boundary-defying way. She says,

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman’s breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature’s mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry “Hold, hold!”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1.5.26-29.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1.5.41-55.

The language throughout this speech is commanding and violent—qualities traditionally associated with masculinity—with words and phrases such as “direst cruelty,” “shake my fell purpose,” and “my keen knife.”⁵⁹ When Lady Macbeth says, “Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,” she asks to be cut off from her feminine nature, to be separated from this essential quality—and thus from herself—entirely.⁶⁰

Many critics discuss the way that Lady Macbeth attempts to eliminate her femininity as a way of attaining power in a patriarchal society. Carolyn Asp writes, “Lady Macbeth consciously attempts to reject her feminine sensibility and adopt a male mentality because she perceives that her society equates feminine qualities with weakness.”⁶¹ While Asp acknowledges that Lady Macbeth “is unable either to fuse [masculine or feminine impulses] or to polarize them” (which she notes is observed by Marvin Rosenberg in *The Masks of Macbeth*), Asp concludes that this inability ends with Lady Macbeth being “completely removed from the masculine world she so desperately wanted to enter and which so effectively excluded her.”⁶² This formulation—this idea that Lady Macbeth tries to become more masculine, fails, and is removed from the masculine world—does not fully or accurately capture Lady Macbeth’s role in the play. Neither does the assertion that she fails to become at all masculine and merely remains (or even becomes more) feminine, such as the conception of Lady Macbeth postulated by Maynard Mack: “Yet we would certainly be wrong to see her as monster or fiend. On the contrary, she is perhaps more than usually feminine... [W]e are to think of her as a womanly woman, capable of great natural tenderness, but one who, for the sake of her husband's advancement and probably her own, has

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.4.44, 47, 53.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.4.41-42.

⁶¹ Carolyn Asp, “‘Be bloody, bold and resolute’: Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in *Macbeth*,” *Macbeth: Critical Essays*, ed. S. Schoenbaum (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991), 377-378.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 384, 390.

now wound up her will almost to the breaking point.”⁶³ While she does evoke a strong sense of femininity even as she channels masculine qualities, her language and actions also reflect a much more complex relationship to gender and a more lasting, albeit complicated, power.

Consider again Lady Macbeth’s language in her soliloquy above. When she calls the “sprints” to give her this cruel, seemingly masculine power, she does not say, “make me a man;” she says “unsex me,” which implies a complete loss of sexuality rather than a shift to masculinity and explicitly away from femininity. In fact, her powerful “unsexing” depends on her femininity, as she says, “Come to my woman’s breasts, / And take my milk for gall.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, in addition to being powerful and relying on femininity, the language of her speech is intensely sexual, with phrases like “fill me” and “my woman’s breasts.”⁶⁵

Lady Macbeth’s “unsexing” disrupts her femininity but does not make her explicitly masculine or entirely unsexual; instead, she becomes more sexual at the same time as she demands absence of sexuality. She wants to be neither male nor female, but she in fact seems to inhabit aspects of both roles with her combination of violent, masculine language and sexual, feminine language, all while calling to be “unsexed.” Even the word “unsex” evokes the idea of sex, as it is the negation of that word rather than its own distinct, positive term. It makes sense that this call for absence of sexuality would lead to desire and thus increased sexuality, as desire originates from and is fueled by the lack of something; we want what we cannot have, and so Lady Macbeth’s call of “unsex me,” a call for absence, opens up a new space for desire, a space where she can occupy all possibilities of being and hence defy divisions or boundaries. Instead of pushing back against something in order to get to something else, Lady Macbeth calls for

⁶³ Maynard Mack, “The Many Faces of *Macbeth*,” *Everybody's Shakespeare: Reflections Chiefly on the Tragedies* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 189-190.

⁶⁴ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.5.148-149.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.4.43, 48.

absence rather than opposition and becomes unrestricted in a profound way. Rather than limiting or taking away any aspect of herself, through this process of “unsexing,” of separation *from* herself, she becomes radically unrestricted.

Here we have another key difference between Rosalind and Lady Macbeth: While Rosalind’s fluid identity is defined in dialectical terms, Lady Macbeth’s identity springs out of the creation of possibility against radical absence. When Rosalind says, “If I were a woman,” in the epilogue, she reveals her fluidity through an ambiguous relationship to gender.⁶⁶ She doesn’t call to be ungendered, but rather she maintains an identity that is both male and female at once. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, is neither gendered nor ungendered, neither sexed nor unsexed; she is all these things at once. While we cannot place Rosalind exclusively in the category of either the male or female gender, we cannot place Lady Macbeth in the category of being gendered at all.

Thus, Lady Macbeth transforms herself into a form of being, a self, that is radically undefined, and in this way she derives her power. She is uncontainable and limitless, not restricted by any aspect or sense of her self, which is why this type of power ultimately takes on a possessing nature. By arriving at her power through defining herself against a sort of radical absence, by being all things and nothing at once, Lady Macbeth also becomes both powerful and powerless, destroying her self as she creates it. And, because she has sought her power through a transformation and redefinition of self, her power not only depends on the way she has reconstructed her self, but her self and her subsequent control over that self depend on this power. She even explicitly calls on outside forces—saying, “Come, you spirits”—to control and define herself, paradoxically dislocating the source of her identity to something outside herself

⁶⁶ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Epilogue 16-17.

entirely.⁶⁷ This power that is rooted in an ironic absolute absence becomes essentially a part of, and even the basis of, Lady Macbeth's self. It both provides and displaces agency. She both commands the other characters in the play and loses command over herself as she moves between possessing a great deal of power and being possessed by that power.

In another moment that demonstrates and further complicates Lady Macbeth's complex dynamic of self and power, she says,

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, had I so sworn as you
 Have done to this.⁶⁸

Once again, she uses language that is both masculine and feminine, with the maternal concept of nursing a baby paired with the violence of killing that baby. Additionally, it is language that again relies on absence: The “boneless gums,” and even the image of Lady Macbeth with a child that we never see or hear mentioned throughout the play, depend upon a lack of these things. But differently and more strikingly, this moment engages the issues from her earlier soliloquy—issues of power and creation through absence—with the mother-child relationship. We are not told whether Lady Macbeth actually had a child at any point, but her words powerful regardless. On the stage, words are enough to constitute actions (and in fact they often do, particularly in this play where so much of the action is reported and so much of the plot is contemplation). Thus, by conjuring this image of infanticide, Lady Macbeth essentially carries out her threat. In

⁶⁷ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.5.41.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.7.54-59.

effectively killing by describing the murder of an absent child, Lady Macbeth demonstrates her power to destroy the ultimate origin of life—motherhood and the nurturing of an infant—out of an absence and merely through her own self.

In “Born of Woman: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*,” Janet Adelman writes about the “reimagin[ing of] autonomous male identity” in *Macbeth* through “ruthless excision of all female presence.”⁶⁹ Lady Macbeth is central to that female presence, and Adelman argues that Lady Macbeth’s speech about “the babe” discussed above is the moment where “maternal malevolence [unleashed by the loss of paternal protection] is given its most horrifying expression in Shakespeare.”⁷⁰ According to Adelman, this moment and its maternal malevolence highlight “the vulnerability of men to female power;” in fact, there is something universally and troublingly threatening about her words.⁷¹ Lady Macbeth’s violent motherhood implies that her destruction of self is also a destruction of her baby as extension of self, and if we take the baby as representative of otherness and what would become external life, her self-destruction is on some level a destruction of everything else. In destabilizing herself, the entire world is disrupted, even lost. These implications of Lady Macbeth’s destruction of boundaries and self in particular are more unsettling than those of *As You Like It*, which does not draw out this same equivalence between power and disempowerment and between disruption and total dissolution.

Just as Lady Macbeth and Rosalind have different versions of self-transformation, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth’s versions of identity differ as well. In some ways, Macbeth experiences a similar paradoxical division of self as Lady Macbeth. As James Wells describes, Macbeth’s

⁶⁹ Janet Adelman, “‘Born of Woman’: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*,” *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, ed. Marjorie Garber (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), 91.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 96

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

words “To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus”⁷² capture “his predicament as an illegitimate king without issue” and present a paradox that we try to make sense of, where “Macbeth experiences two temporally distinct, and therefore mutually exclusive, selves at once—the present self of kingship and the future self obliterated by the failure to produce a tender heir who might bear his memory.”⁷³ Ultimately, the convergence of these two selves result in “an aporia” where Macbeth’s identity is at once specifically defined and eliminated.⁷⁴ Just as Lady Macbeth’s identity emerges from a problematic dynamic of power and absence, “the play presents Macbeth’s identity as a problem; the moment that identity is asserted is the moment that identity dissolves.”⁷⁵ Yet despite this similar quality—a simultaneous assertion and dissolution—of their selves, the nature of each character’s identity is in fact distinct. Macbeth “strives to establish the singular identity promised to him” and struggles “to acquire, fix, and maintain not just an identity ... but the one he is fated to become.”⁷⁶ Lady Macbeth is not seeking any such “singular identity;” rather, she seeks an identity as defined *against* singularity.

Steven Mullaney enumerates similar issues with Macbeth’s identity as shaped by ambition through treason in “Lying Like Truth: Riddle, Representation and Treason in Renaissance England.” Mullaney describes how Macbeth, as a traitor, “is caught by a riddle or a prophecy in an equivocal space between the truth and a lie ... [and his treason] threatens the foundations of order itself.”⁷⁷ The two-sidedness of prophecy and of treason is problematic for Macbeth, as “taking one course through it does not eliminate the other,” and trying to exclude

⁷² Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 3.1.48.

⁷³ James Wells, “‘To be thus is nothing’: *Macbeth* and the trials of dramatic identity,” *Macbeth: New Critical Essays*, ed. Nick Moschovakis (New York: Routledge, 2008), 224.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Steven Mullaney, “Lying Like Truth: Riddle, Representation and Treason in Renaissance England,” *ELH* 47.1 (1980): 35.

one thing necessarily leads to the inclusion of it—misrule implies rule, and exclusion implies inclusion.⁷⁸ Macbeth’s treason is still defined against an established entity, an order that already exists. Lady Macbeth does not define herself against anything in existence, but rather in relation to absence.

Lady Macbeth most completely occupies this formidable position of simultaneous self-presence and self-absence in the play during her sleepwalking scene. In this scene, her demeanor has changed drastically from earlier moments such as the scene after Duncan’s death when she exerts her powerful will over Macbeth, cleaning up the bloody daggers herself and telling Macbeth, “My hands are of your color, but I shame / To wear a heart so white.”⁷⁹ Now, she no longer has this kind of self-controlled authority: she is sleepwalking, has requested to have a light with her at all times, and continually tries to wash her hands of a “damned spot” that she cannot get out.⁸⁰ She seems to be no longer in control of herself, let alone in control of Macbeth. Yet, though she no longer asserts the same overt control, she has a different sort of power over the other characters, a power that has taken control of—or possessed—her as well. When she sleepwalks, she does so with her eyes open; and though she is merely walking in her sleep, both the Doctor and the Gentlewoman who attend her refuse to approach her or attempt to wake her up. They are fearful of her power even when, or perhaps precisely because, she is unconscious.

While she is moving through her chambers, Lady Macbeth is neither asleep nor awake. Her eyes are both open and “their sense are shut”—a threatening effect for both the other characters and for us as members of the audience.⁸¹ Lady Macbeth is seemingly conscious and looking out at the people around her, but she lacks any internal presence or sense of self. She is

⁷⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁷⁹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 2.3.63-64.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.1.38.

⁸¹ Ibid., 5.1.28.

completely present and absent at once, blurring the lines between waking and sleeping. She even troubles the boundaries between life and death, as her inability to wake combined with her ability to walk and speak and command an uncanny power through a complete absence of self reflect a sort of life in death, giving new meaning to Macbeth's earlier outcry against "murder[ing] sleep."⁸²

The uncanny power of her sleepwalking is contingent upon the act of witnessing or spectating, which of course is especially meaningful in the context of theater. On a dramatic level, there are several factors at play that complicate this scene for us as viewers. For one thing, Lady Macbeth's identity becomes especially ambiguous in this moment, and a threat emerges from that ambiguity. Because we are aware that Lady Macbeth is a character in a play, we experience what Wells calls "the paradox of dramatic character."⁸³ This paradox is that of the simultaneity of character and actor that "arises from the dual nature of dramatic character, which combines a fictional self, with its own will and identity, with a real actor, whose animating presence both supplies and contravenes that fictional identity."⁸⁴ Thus, though Lady Macbeth has her eyes open with "senses shut," as audience members, we are aware that the actor's eyes are simply open and looking back at us. This means that though we are led to believe that our gaze will be unreturned by Lady Macbeth, we also know that—just on the level of the actor—it will be. And then, of course, the fact that we feel vulnerable to the gaze of a fictional character amplifies the impact of the threat. Our recognition of the actor also heightens our proximity to Lady Macbeth. As previously explained, this recognition brings us to realize that Lady Macbeth is not merely contained within the play but permeates our world in a real, tangible way.

Both this ambiguity and proximity are more strongly activated in this moment because

⁸² Ibid., 2.2.35.

⁸³ Wells, "To be thus," 228.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking becomes like a form of acting as she soliloquies and walks about the stage, rubbing her hands—the Doctor even describes her motions as “performances,” and the Gentlewoman says, “This is her very guise.”⁸⁵ As further evidence of the performative nature of her sleepwalking, Fox notes the change in Lady Macbeth's language in this scene, pointing out that “when she speaks, the elevated language and the represented royal dignity of her character are gone.”⁸⁶ This loss of royal dignity, and of self entirely, “frees the character from the constraints of representational performance, and creates an opening in theatrical space for the audience's awareness of the performing actor.”⁸⁷ Fox describes this space in positive terms—Lady Macbeth has been freed and a space opened—framing it as a stable and even safe place for viewers. On the contrary, this space is incredibly unstable and troubling to audience members, as it destabilizes any secure footing we think we have in a world that we imagine to be entirely separate from the play.

More profoundly, though, it is the very fact that Lady Macbeth's gaze doesn't return to us that is the source of its power over us. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking may seem as if it should be the safest moment for both the characters and the “real” audience to watch Lady Macbeth: in theory, we can see her while she cannot see us. Further complicating the scene is the fact that she is not only blind to us, but she is also seeing something that we cannot, something that reveals itself to be incredibly private as she speaks and acts out her vision. Yet instead of feeling like we have power over her because of our supposedly un-mirrored viewing of a private scene, we begin to feel uncomfortable with the close proximity and uncertain nature of Lady Macbeth's gaze. We feel as if we are intruding on her private moment and we feel exposed: the Doctor and the Gentlewoman both express their discomfort, saying, “Go to, go to! You have known what you /

⁸⁵ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.1.13, 21.

⁸⁶ Fox, “Like a poor player,” 221.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

should not” and “She has spoke what she has not, I / am sure of that.”⁸⁸ But of course, all of theater is essentially just that—an intrusion on private worlds and interactions—and so these feelings of discomfort and exposure from un-mirrored viewing point to the potential power theater may have over us more generally.

As an audience, once we feel exposed, we feel threatened by these compounded factors of the character’s closeness to us and the absence of “sense” in her vision. The character of Lady Macbeth’s eyes should not return our gaze except as empty mirroring, but we cannot know for sure that they do not. And indeed, that empty mirroring is itself a threat. There is no way to tell if there is anything “there,” any self, behind the senseless eyes of Lady Macbeth, and so we cannot even identify the source of the threat, which relocates it back to our own selves in a way. It becomes the act of watching—of being mirrored by eyes with no self behind them—that threatens our understanding of our own selves, making us aware of a vulnerability to be displaced by a sleepwalking fictional character.

The characters within play also demonstrate this fear of displacement through spectating. When the Doctor says, “My mind she has mated and amazed my sight: / I think, but dare not speak,” he admits that Lady Macbeth in her ostensibly passive state has troubled and even commanded his mind in a real way.⁸⁹ Just as the Doctor tries to push away from further entanglement with Lady Macbeth in this menacing moment—saying, “This disease is beyond my practice”—we, spectators to the scene as well, are frightened of Lady Macbeth’s power and want to remove ourselves from its influence.⁹⁰ But, of course, this is the moment when we are the closest to Lady Macbeth. Not only are we especially susceptible to some sort of “mating” of the

⁸⁸ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.1.49-52.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.1.82-83.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.1.62.

mind simply through the act of observing Lady Macbeth, we cannot identify from what realm, the theater or our own reality, we are being threatened.

This dangerous space is further complicated by the fact that Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking also disrupts the temporality of the play. Lady Macbeth is at once in the present moment of sleepwalking and in the past, reliving and reenacting Duncan's murder as if it has just happened. This reenactment unsettles the order of the play and displaces us. We find ourselves experiencing both the present moment of the play (that is, Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking) and the earlier moment of Duncan's death, which we have already witnessed. In her trance-like state, when she plays out the aftermath of Duncan's murder that we know to have happened earlier in the play, we must question what distinguishes this present moment from the past. Rather than experiencing the play linearly, we find ourselves lost in present and past and inevitably future all at once, the world of the play permeating our own as it becomes uncontained, freed from its structure.

All of these disturbances in our expectations of theater and our relationship to the play also result in an unsettling of our idea of self. Wells writes, "The present for Lady Macbeth is a perpetual reiteration of the past, and she is clearly 'rapt,' insensible alike to both temporal states of selfhood... By nullifying Lady Macbeth's self through a doubling of it, the play doubly redoubles the audience's experience of dramatic character's paradox of self-dispossession."⁹¹ Lady Macbeth's enraptured, transported state risks placing us in a similar state—even just for a moment—where our own identities become tenuous.

As Lady Macbeth evades these boundaries—of gender, of sleep, even of being itself—by allowing herself to be neither one thing nor another, neither with gender nor without, neither awake nor asleep, she brings about the destruction of her own self. This self-destruction

⁹¹ Wells, "To be thus," 236.

continues to make her more menacing. She attains an uncanny self-less presence that enables her to exist more radically outside of boundaries, and so the processes feed off of each other, leading to her increased threat and increased loss of self. Though she seems to possess power throughout the play, in many ways her power has also possesses her—the Doctor even describes her as having an “Infected mind.”⁹² We see how by entering this uncertain space, gaining power by disrupting natural order, she has begun to destroy her own self. The possessing quality of this power also helps explain the nature of her transformation of self in which she moves from a position of seeming control at the beginning of the play to one where her power comes only in her sleep while she appears to be going insane. In the end, she no longer has control over her self or over the external source from which she initially draws her power. In fact, this power becomes more and more in control of her as well as others—it is a power that goes beyond Lady Macbeth, becoming autonomous, existing and functioning outside of her and without her.

Early critical responses to the play and to Lady Macbeth can illuminate the disruption of Lady Macbeth’s very real influence over audience members. A. C. Bradley, who wrote some of the most well-known and significant criticism of Shakespeare’s plays, provides an account of Lady Macbeth in his work *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Bradley grapples with the perplexing ambiguities of Lady Macbeth’s character, particularly struggling to understand how she can be both a sympathetic and seemingly inhuman figure. Consider, for example, the following portion of his “Lecture X” on *Macbeth*, in which he tries to work out this complexity:

Yet if the Lady Macbeth of these scenes were really utterly inhuman, or a ‘fiend-like queen,’ as Malcolm calls her, the Lady Macbeth of the sleep-walking scene would be an impossibility. The one woman could never become the other. And in

⁹² Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.1.76.

fact, if we look below the surface, there is evidence enough in the earlier scenes of preparation for the later. I do not mean that Lady Macbeth was naturally humane. There is nothing in the play to show this, and several passages subsequent to the murder-scene supply proof to the contrary.⁹³

In attempting to describe Lady Macbeth in this passage and throughout his criticism on *Macbeth*, Bradley's writing becomes somewhat fragmentary. He jumps between various points in the play and frequently qualifies his statements about Lady Macbeth, which indicates a difficulty of arriving at a comprehensive understanding of this character. Bradley himself seems to be fragmented in his very attempt to grasp Lady Macbeth.

This struggle to grasp a complete understanding of Lady Macbeth is not inherently different from any other typical attempt to paint a full picture of a character in criticism. Even so, the language of Bradley's account of Lady Macbeth can seem telltale. For instance, he writes, "But it can hardly be doubted that Shakespeare meant the predominant impression to be one of awe, grandeur, and horror, and that he never meant this impression to be lost, however it might be modified, as Lady Macbeth's activity diminishes and her misery increases."⁹⁴ The negative construction—"it can hardly be doubted"—is not only a tenuous phrase, but it also parallels the frequent paradoxical nature of Lady Macbeth's language, such as her "unsex me" speech. Rather than state a positive assertion, Bradley, like Lady Macbeth, in the act of ruling out possibilities conjures the doubts that he aims to exclude, thus emphasizing the idea of doubt at the same time as he highlights the "predominant impression." With these kinds of phrases, rather than limiting or narrowing his account Lady Macbeth, he opens up space for more interpretive possibilities and complexities.

⁹³ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1919), 368-369.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 378.

Bradley's language is no less revealing when he speaks of the source of the character's power. He writes, "The reader who looks unwillingly at Iago gazes at Lady Macbeth in awe, because though she is dreadful she is also sublime."⁹⁵ He uses this language of sublimity again, writing, "We are sure that she never betrayed her husband or herself by a word or even a look, save in sleep. However appalling she may be, she is sublime."⁹⁶ Though she is "dreadful" and "appalling," Lady Macbeth's ultimate power comes out of the fact that we somehow find ourselves, perhaps unwillingly, looking at her "in awe"—though set up as an opposition, one can't help feeling that the dread plays a part in the sublimity. The ambiguity of Lady Macbeth's character, which is the very problem Bradley struggles with, starts to feel like the source of her power. This idea is consistent with the way Lady Macbeth's hold over the other characters is rooted in the radically unrestricted nature of her identity, and Bradley's response demonstrates how this hold reaches beyond the (seeming) limits of the play, impacting even the way the character is written about.

Lady Macbeth's death is also consistent with her pervasive influence. When we are told that Lady Macbeth's death has occurred offstage, it seems like an afterthought, backstage to the drama of Macbeth's downfall. However, Lady Macbeth is not merely an expendable character. Rather, her fate reflects how threatening she has become to the order of the play and to the play's relationship to the order of the world more generally, as is made clear in the sleepwalking scene, which is the last time we see her in the play. Ironically, her death itself—her ultimate undoing—is yet another act that demonstrates her power. Unlike Macbeth, whose death plays into the repeating fabric of the play—with his severed head displayed on a pole like a warning for future men like himself—Lady Macbeth makes her exit outside the structure of the repeating story and

⁹⁵ Ibid., 332.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 368.

outside the foretelling of any prophecy. She does not bring about her own death in the same way that Macbeth does, within a given structure, when he trusts blindly in a prophecy that he thinks will protect him but which ultimately leads to his death; instead, she ends her life herself, independent of any pre-told fate.⁹⁷ She has again dodged the structure that ultimately constricts Macbeth.

Perhaps the play does not deal with Lady Macbeth's death more forthrightly because her death is, like Lady Macbeth herself, threatening in its ability to transcend the rigid structure that so much of the play adheres to. And yet, paradoxically, it is also threatening *because* of the fact that the structure of the play, and therefore we as audience members, refuse to deal with it. Just as our impulse to push away from the world of *As You Like It* further entangles us with that world, our desire to remove Lady Macbeth entirely makes her all the more threatening to us. This threat is so immediate and disquieting because it is our own world, our own identities, that are at stake. We push away from Lady Macbeth because she entirely dismantles and thus forces us to reconstruct the boundaries between self and play, particularly in moments like the sleepwalking scene. Merely as passive viewers of this play, we become vulnerable to a necessary and involuntary reconstitution of self and world, an understanding that we cannot separate even our most interior selves from an external, fictional world. Even the act of our pushing away demonstrates our inseparability from the world of the play.

This idea of being halted and even drawn in by something not yet encountered—of the power of something removed from us—is one that occurs frequently throughout *Macbeth*. From the start, it is the thought of what Macbeth does not have that halts him and takes over his thoughts. When the witches first give their prophecy to Macbeth and Banquo, saying, “All hail,

⁹⁷ In fact, she doesn't seem to spend much time thinking about the prophecies at all: “The Witches are practically nothing to her” (Bradley 372).

Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter,” Macbeth is affected enough by this piece of news that Banquo responds, “Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?”⁹⁸ Macbeth is apparently very troubled by the witches words, and though he does “seem to fear” the news, he cannot let go of the idea that he will be king. It is this first prophecy that is a catalyst for his undoing. He struggles with his fixation on a prophecy, and on the actions he feels he must take after hearing such a prophecy, that he wishes he could push away:

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder is yet but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smothered in surmise.⁹⁹

Again and again throughout the play, in a way that parallels the relationship between distance and desire described in the previous chapter, characters are unable to escape the things they reject or push away from. For example, when Malcolm and Donalbain leave for England and Ireland after Duncan’s murder, suspicion immediately falls upon them: Macduff says, “Malcolm and Donalbain, the king’s two sons, / Are stol’n away and fled, which puts upon them / Suspicion of the deed.”¹⁰⁰ With Lady Macbeth, it is when she calls to be “unsexed,” attempting to push away her feminine, sexual qualities, that she becomes even more sexual.

In considering Lady Macbeth’s fate, I acknowledge some truth in Adelman’s depiction of

⁹⁸ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.3.50-52.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.3.134-141.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.4.25-27.

the world at the end of the play as having been excised of (at least immediate) female presence. She claims that the play ends with “the final victory of a masculine order in which mothers no longer threaten because they no longer exist[,] ... maternal power is given its most virulent sway and then abolished.”¹⁰¹ However, Lady Macbeth (and thus the necessarily included female aspect of her), threatens precisely *because* she no longer exists. In fact, it is by remaining powerful not only in spite of but because of this apparent excision—this seeming check to power—that Lady Macbeth is as deeply threatening as she is. She does not rely on overt shows of strength that would make it easier to classify her as fictional and separate from us. Consider Macbeth’s last moment alive in the play: he charges in battle, saying, “Yet I will try the last. Before my body / I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff; / And damned be him that first cries “Hold, enough!””¹⁰² As he dies in front of us in this dramatic manner and goes on to be held in front of us as a decapitated head atop a pole, Macbeth entirely loses any sort of power or threat over us. His fate is overt and unambiguous and easy to step away from.

Unlike Macbeth, Lady Macbeth’s impact does not end when her part in the play is over. Lady Macbeth’s offstage death, which seems to push her out of the play completely, reflects how threatening she truly remains even after she has died. The play has a way of dealing with Macbeth and his acts of treason within its structure. By ending with his head on a pole, the conclusion of the play “returns to the question of treason’s representation,” repeating the play’s opening where “different versions of treason’s final performance are described.”¹⁰³ This ending forces Macbeth back into the structure of the play, back into the repeating and mirrored cycle of treason which he cannot escape, presenting his severed head as both a warning against his actions and as a display of his ultimate return to an existing structure. Lady Macbeth avoids this

¹⁰¹ Adelman, ““Born of Woman,”” 111.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 5.8.32-34.

¹⁰³ Mullaney, “Lying Like Truth,” 44.

fate with her offstage death and even before that with her crazed sleepwalking. Though her power comes at a great, and eventually the ultimate, personal cost, she, not Macbeth, is in some regards the character who most successfully retains any sense of power over the other characters and particularly over the audience.

We never actually see Lady Macbeth's fate on stage, leaving open the possibility that she has not actually died—though it doesn't actually matter whether she is alive or not. It is this space of possibility through absence that allows her, even in death, to remain present in the minds of audience members. It is fitting that her fate is ultimately absence. It demonstrates yet again how the power she acquires involves the intertwined destruction of boundaries and self, and how her death is the one act that doesn't seem to fit, that seems to finally break from the expected, repeating order that the rest of the play falls into.

Though both Rosalind and Lady Macbeth disrupt gender and exist at once inside and outside of boundaries, they do so on different levels. They have opposite fates: Rosalind ends up reunited with her father and married to Orlando, whereas Lady Macbeth appears to go crazy and ultimately commits suicide. And yet, these fates share several similarities. Both women appear to be pushed out of their positions of power—Rosalind takes on a passive role as bride and daughter, and Lady Macbeth stops crafting the plot for Macbeth's rise to power, becoming so apparently passive that we see her sleepwalking and ultimately learn that she has killed herself. However, both women also show an evasion of that forced passivity when, in the end, they cannot be limited by the structures of their plays. Rosalind delivers the epilogue and enters the “real” world of the audience while simultaneously remaining a part of the fictional play, but when Lady Macbeth disappears from the structure of her play entirely, she both exceeds the play and is excised from it. *As You Like It*, through Rosalind, points out our inability to separate our

world from the world of the play by letting us recognize the fluidity of such boundaries; *Macbeth*, through Lady Macbeth especially, demonstrates the true danger of such a fluidity by making us experience a more thoroughgoing loss of boundaries, thus destabilizing, at least temporarily, our understanding of the separation between interior and exterior worlds.

CONCLUSION: THEATER AND THE WORLD

At the end of my first chapter, I asserted that there is a great deal at stake in the status of boundaries. Through the instability of gender and the complication of structures of desire in *As You Like It*, our ability to distinguish construction and “truth,” and in fact the existence of any fundamental difference between the two, comes into question. At stake in this lack of difference, then, is the ability to produce histories and to understand our own relative position to history.

Macbeth raises these stakes, disrupting already unidentifiable boundaries and presenting an even more destabilized form of gender and desire through Lady Macbeth. Even more profoundly than in the comedy, *Macbeth* complicates our understanding of the production of history, particularly because the sense of time and history within *Macbeth* is so vexed. But beyond raising questions about the relationship between past and present (and consequently our relation to history), the disruptions of *Macbeth* upset our ability to construct our selves: rather than deriving from within or without, fiction is related to the constitution of the very distinction between self and world.

Though the implications of *As You Like It* and *Macbeth* ultimately differ, the two plays both suggest that there is an intimate relation among identity, desire, and theater. As the plays blur boundaries between interior and exterior spaces and suggest there is no way to separate the two, they also suggest that identity, theater, and desire all become profoundly implicated with one another. The plays draw out the relations between these entities—demonstrating, for example, how the experience of “not having” that is inherent to theater is essential to the very origins of desire and thus also the very possibility of subjectivity—and show that it is out of this interplay that an understanding of the nature of self, and of the world more generally, arise. Thus

even the pure diversion of theater—a matter of constructing a world of shadows—brings us close to the wellsprings of the self.

As we leave a performance of *As You Like It* with Rosalind's gender-destabilizing and desire-provoking words, "If I were a woman" ringing in our ears, we remain unable to separate ourselves from the play, unable to differentiate between "true" and constructed gender in large part due to our own feelings of desire toward (or at least entanglement with) fictional characters in the play. And as we exit the theater after viewing *Macbeth*, memories of Lady Macbeth's uncanny sleepwalking gaze creep back into our consciousness as we find ourselves unable to leave this character on the stage, in the world of the play. We realize that merely in the act of watching *Macbeth*, we have been drawn in and threatened by an imaginary world and a fictional character, and the distinctions between inner and outer worlds, even our understanding of temporality, are dismantled. Our experience of these plays becomes inseparable in some ways from our experience of the world—a world in which the boundaries of the self and the limits of fiction are more indistinct than we once thought; in which even our understanding of the delineation of history is challenged; and, consequently, in which our own position becomes more complex and uncertain, and thus more freed and allowed a greater wealth of possibility.

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