“Are You a Man?”: Transitioning in Shakespearean Tragedies

Anant Utchin
University of Massachusetts
E-Mail: utchin.anant@gmail.com

Abstract

Building upon an interpretation that Desdemona is a trans figure, this essay argues that in the cases of Lady Macbeth and Goneril there also exist sex-gender transitions which are at the level of constitution rather than mere costumery often seen in Shakespearean comedies. Female characters such as Lady Macbeth and Goneril encroach upon the territory of what would have been strictly male in their bold assertions over and defiance towards their husbands, their wishes to become a man, and their challenging their husbands' manhood. Most importantly, as the early modern believed witches to be hermaphroditic, the fact that both of them are closely affiliated with witchcraft and can even themselves be considered witches points to the possibility of their being trans. In keeping with the period's strict association of the female sex with frailty, the essay suggests there may be attempts on the playwright's part to muffle or stifle the transitioning female characters who would have been a threat to the early modern social order.

Keywords: ***Shakespearean tragedies, sex-gender transition, transvestitism, Lady Macbeth, Goneril***

In 2017 – 401 years after the death of William Shakespeare – the world is looking towards a genderless future. At the MTV Movie & TV Awards on May 7, Emma Watson, arguably one of the torchbearers for the millennials, who, pertaining to her title as UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, has strived to achieve the gender equality and break down the gender stereotypes, won for the first time in history a gender-neutral acting award for her performance in Beauty and the Beast. The significant move to overlook the anatomy or the gender identity and focus solely on the quality of the performance, making the MTV Awards the first major film and TV prizes ceremony that ditched the gender-divisive categories, had been made by MTV president Chris McCarthy, who proclaimed that “[t]his audience,” namely, the millennials who reached young adulthood in the 21st century, “actually doesn’t see male-female dividing lines” (qtd. in Mumford, “MTV”). The celebrated crowd before the stage, which was made up of prominent figures of Watson’s ilk – young actors, musical artists, and celebrities who are highly influential to the young generations – gave a big round of applause when Watson said during her acceptance speech – as the millennials’ manifesto of sort – “acting is about the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. And that doesn’t need to be separated into two categories” (qtd. in Mumford, “Emma”). In other words, our identity – a social fiction we

choose for ourselves to act upon – need no longer be defined by the gender binary. Despite the trend in some major countries – in the UK itself as indicated by Brexit and the US by the emergence of Donald Trump – where the proclivity for the right-leaning stance has been rekindled, genderlessness is slowly becoming the norm. If the existence of one major gender-neutral awards ceremony does not suffice, one may continue to look for evidence across the free world. No less than 120 schools in the UK have adopted a genderless school uniform policy, in which boys and girls can choose to wear either pants or skirts or both wear a unisex uniform for all (Ross). Gender-neutral restrooms are set to be installed in at least seven out of 11 venues being constructed for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games (Graham). Moreover, the search for the universal gender-neutral pronoun that has been ongoing since the mid 19th century at least continues, going more enthusiastically than ever (Nunn).

The Bard of Avon lived in one of the times where the world could not be more conscious of gender binarism. One is compelled to invoke the imaginary yet powerful example of Virginia Woolf's Judith Shakespeare – the "extraordinarily gifted sister" (p. 47). "[A]s adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world," Judith Shakespeare, solely because, unlike her brother, she was a woman, never received classical education like her brother did, never had a chance to achieve her passionate aspiration of being an actress, and, most importantly, though she "had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words," never published a play (p. 47-8). The constraints of gender drove her to "[kill] herself one winter's night" – the final exit not different from Lady Macbeth's and Goneril's (p. 48). Nevertheless, the name of William Shakespeare, whose works have endured over four centuries and still retain their riveting magnetism to readers across languages and cultures, has come to connote the independence from the constraints of time itself. Therefore, in the aspect of sex and gender, Shakespeare, again, proves ahead of his time in the making of some of his most memorable female characters in tragedies, who confuse and undercut the Elizabethan adamantine gender binary at the level of one's physical constitution, and not just one's gender expression achieved, for example, through one's costume – professing, as it were, what becomes celebrated among the young minds four centuries later, e.g. the inclination to not "be separated into two categories."

Transvestitism, or, as the Oxford English Dictionary defines, "the action of dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex," is not something uncommon in William Shakespeare's plays. Apart from the fact that Shakespeare's characters – men and women alike – would have been performed by male actors as the English Renaissance prohibited against female actors, and the prohibition was not lifted until the restoration of King Charles II, a number of Shakespeare's plays, mainly comedies, consist of a part in which a female character has to disguise herself as a man. For example, Viola in Twelfth Night, after being

shipwrecked and washed ashore in Illyria, disguises herself as a young man named Cesario and becomes a page to Duke Orsino, the man she ends up being in love with. Likewise, Imogen, the British princess in Cymbeline, dresses herself as a boy named Fidele after learning of her beloved husband's plan to have her murdered. That these transformations are limited to a matter of mere costumery is clear in the observation that these female characters, having assumed a male role, are self-conscious of their true sex or still retain their conventionally feminine qualities, not to mention that their true identities as women are disclosed at the end. "Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife," says Viola in an aside when she agrees to woo Olivia on Orsino's behalf (I.iv.42). Challenged to a duel with Sir Andrew Aguecheek, Viola becomes afraid and says to herself, "Pray God defend me! A little thing would / make me tell them how much I lack of a man" (III.iv.301-2). Moreover, the treatment of Belarius, Guiderius and Arviragus towards the young Fidele could almost make one feel as though Imogen had not disguised herself at all. Guiderius, actually Imogen's long lost brother, proclaims to her, "Were you a woman, youth, / I should woo hard but be your groom in honesty" (III.vi.66-7). Belarius insists that Fidele must be their "housewife" (IV.ii.45).

Although there is no cross-dressing in Shakespearean tragedies, there is, however, evidence of transitioning from female to male which is more than a change of costume and which can even be considered a change of constitution or essence. The distinction between the more light-hearted transvestitism or crossdressing in comedies (or a tragicomedy in Cymbeline's case), such as referred to in mentioning Viola/Cesario and Imogen/Fidele, and the more serious hermaphroditic transformation in tragedies – the topic of this essay – therefore needs to be made first and foremost. Whereas the former deals with disguising one's sex outwardly, temporarily and unmistakably in order to accommodate the plot, the latter's sex change takes place inwardly and more subtly at both the somatic and the psychological levels, posing and representing a muted threat to the early modern strict distinctions between the male and the female. In the essay "Desdemona's Dildo: Fetish Objects and Transitional Sex in Othello, Guevara puts forth the argument that Desdemona is "trans" (p. 29). That Desdemona has been tied to the idea of duality, being "a problematic character vacillating between virtue and vice, morality and transgression, purity and prurience," and in turn eluding critics' grasp, is due partly to her "inscrutable sex." Guevara contends that Desdemona's handkerchief serves her as a dildo, a fitting claim as it represents Othello, being "her first remembrance from the moor," the thing she keeps about her to "kiss and talk to" (III.iii.295, 300). That the handkerchief, as a dildo, can be "movable, capable of fastening to the body but fundamentally detachable" points to its being to Desdemona "a transitional object," allowing her to vacillate between feminine and masculine, rendering Desdemona's a "transitional sex," mutable like the movement of the

handkerchief and also, ultimately, unknowable (p. 27, p. 39-40). Moreover, the text does invite questions regarding Desdemona's sex first by having Desdemona, being fascinated by Othello's adventurous accounts of bloody battles, rough terrains, and cannibals, wish that "heaven had made her such a man" (I.iii.163-4). It also has Cassio refer to her as "our great captain's captain" and Othello call her "fair warrior," therefore associating Desdemona with a conventionally and strictly masculine role of a military figure, strongly contradicting her father's description of her as a "maid never bold, / Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion / Blushed at herself" (II.i.74, 180; I.iii.95-7). The duality or ambiguity in her character is made stronger when Desdemona herself proclaims, "I do beguile / The thing I am by seeming otherwise" (II.i.122-3). It is also confirmed when Othello agrees with Iago when the latter says of Desdemona, "when she seemed to shake, and fear your looks, / She loved them most" (III.iii.210-1).

Like Desdemona, this paper will proceed to argue, Macbeth's Lady Macbeth and King Lear's Goneril can also be considered trans figures and, in turn, a threat to the English Renaissance's social order. The contemporary attitude towards masculine-looking women, which must have influenced, and, in turn, been reflected in, Shakespeare's treatment of his sexually transgressive female leads in tragedies, betrays the overlap between those crossdressing women and what was perceived to be characteristic of a witch. Besides their socially destabilizing ambiguity in gender, both were subject to the stigma of being lecherous and therefore need to be suppressed or put an end to inevitably. That said, not only do Lady Macbeth and Goneril transgress the rigid sex-gender boundaries of the early modern England by possessing conventionally masculine characteristics instead of traditionally feminine ones and undermining their husbands' manhood, both of them are also closely associated with witchcraft and can even be considered themselves witches, therefore being hermaphroditic as witches are. That both of them are subject to suicides offstage, what Chamberlain refers to in her essay, in Lady Macbeth's case, as a "solitary, anti-climactic death, unmourned either by Macbeth and his society" (p. 87), can be interpreted as the attempt on the playwright's part to stifle such threatening female characters. Such attempt would be in keeping with the punishments which the early modern England exposed the women daring to disrupt the sex-gender system to, or, in Lady Macbeth's case, with the tragic fate the mothers who pose a threat to patrilineage could be subjected to. Alternatively, according to the accepted medical knowledge of the time, their deaths could be seen as a fitting consequence for women who have turned witch-like.

To begin with, the early modern England possessed an anxiety over the disruption of the sex-gender boundaries, which would consequently undermine the whole social order. Cross-dressing was not limited only to the male actors on stage. There were records of women who walked the streets of London in male

clothes as well as there were preachers and polemicists who had to constantly condemn the practice from at least 1580-1620 (Howard, 1988, p. 418). For example, the anti-theatrical tracts in the Elizabethan time had not only castigated the cross-dressing of male actors but also often extended their attacks on "women who dressed mannishly" (p. 420). That the practice of women dressing as men was considered a serious offense can be grasped from the punishments the transgressors were subjected to, which, as the records of two courts in London between approximately 1565 and 1605 show, included being whipped and pilloried for hours (p. 420-1). However, what lied beneath the regulations of what one was and was not supposed to wear was the fear of the social order being disrupted. Phillip Stubbes, who wrote the 1583 Anatomie of Abuses, a censurer of the cross-dressing of women, argued that "Our Apparell was given us as a signe distinctive to discern betwixt sex and sex, & therefore one to weare the Apparel of another sex, is to participate with the same, and to adulterate the veritie of his owne kinde" (Howard, 1988, p. 422). Donning men's clothes, women "encroached on the privileges of the advantaged sex" (Howard, 1988, p. 420), posing a threat to the rigid early modern gender hierarchy where men had to always be superior, and where women, lacking "masculine perfection," were expected to be "softer, weaker, less hot" and "silent, chaste, and immured within the home" (p. 423-4). As a result, women who cross-dressed were given the stigma of possessing "sexual incontinence" or of "being whores" altogether (p. 424).

Therefore, Lady Macbeth, who disrupts the sex-gender boundaries without having to dress in men's clothing, would have been a menacing sight to the audience in the early seventeenth century. In Elizabethan literature, being "manly" means being "aggressive, daring, bold, resolute, and strong, especially in the face of death, whether giving or receiving," whereas being "womanly" constitutes being "gentle, fearful, pitying, wavering, and soft" (Kimbrough, 1983, p. 177). Defying the early modern notions of what a woman was supposed to be, and at the same time possessing all the characteristics worthy of a man, Lady Macbeth proves a more forceful character than her husband in taking a lead in the murder of King Duncan, calculating all that needs to be done all on her own. Indeed, she could have carried out the task all by herself, "[h]ad [Duncan] not resembled / [her] father as he slept" (II.ii.13-4). Lady Macbeth's assertions when she first alludes to the plan – "you shall put / This night's great business into my dispatch" and "leave all the rest to me" (I.v.67-8, 73) – can be juxtaposed with Macbeth's delay – "We will speak further" (p. 71) – and his long contemplation afterwards of how "[b]loody instructions" could "return / To plague th'inventor" and how Duncan is at his castle "in double trust," which leads him to conclude, "We will proceed no further in this business" (I.vii.9-10, 12, 31). Furthermore, after Duncan has been slain, while Macbeth is being ridden with guilt, hallucinating, hearing a voice that cries of his murdering a

man in his sleep, Lady Macbeth shows that she is neither "gentle" nor "wavering" nor "soft," putting an end to the undertaking by smearing the sleeping guards with blood and proclaiming her husband "[i]nfirm of purpose" (II.ii.53). Subversively, it is the woman who announces the man "too full o'th' milk of human kindness" (I.v.17), and the man who has to commend the woman's "undaunted mettle," such as when Macbeth tells his wife to "[b]ring forth men-children only" (II.i.73-4).

In addition, not only does Lady Macbeth evince the conventionally masculine qualities in her assertiveness and firmness of mind and purpose, she also at the same time further disrupts the gender hierarchy by constantly disrupting her husband's manhood. First of all, being told of her husband's wish to abort the murder, Lady Macbeth questions if Macbeth would "live a coward" by "[l]etting 'I dare not', wait upon 'I would'" and ends up staking her husband's manhood on the execution of the murder, proclaiming, "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (I.vii.43-4, 49). Moreover, apart from being announced as "[i]nfirm of purpose," Macbeth's frailty is again brought to the fore when Lady Macbeth, whose hands are alike covered with blood, pronounces, "My hands are of your colour, but I shame / To wear a heart so white" (II.ii.65-6). Macbeth's weakness at this point can even be considered effeminacy as it is juxtaposed with the strength of a woman and proves poorer. Nevertheless, Lady Macbeth's challenge of her husband's manhood culminates in the banquet scene in which she, witnessing Macbeth's hallucination of seeing the ghost of the slain Banquo, asks outright, "Are you a man?" (III.iv.55). His starts and expressions of feeling troubled she deems as becoming a "woman's story at a winter's fire, / Authorized by her grandam" before proclaiming him "[q]uite unmanned in folly" (p. 62-3, p. 71). As a result, Macbeth's manhood is undoubtedly threatened as when the ghost exits afterwards, Macbeth utters, "Why so, being gone, I am a man again" (p. 105-6). Paralleling Lady Macbeth who undermines the sex-gender system while still retaining a woman's clothes, Macbeth, in male clothing, resembles men wearing "effeminately ornate clothes" who were stigmatized by the early modern England as, in Stubbe's words, "weake, tender, and infirme, not able to abide such sharp conflicts and blustering stormes" (qtd. in Howard, 1983, p. 424).

Interestingly, the duality displayed in Desdemona – her tendency to "beguile / The thing [she is] by seeming otherwise" – is echoed in Lady Macbeth's insistence on feigning an appearance – "to beguile the time, / Look like the time ... look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't" (I.v.63-6). Moreover, Lady Macbeth's imploration to the spirits to "unsex" her can be equated with Desdemona's wish that "heaven had made her such a man." That Lady Macbeth attempts the change of her constitution can be deduced from her entreatment to the spirits to take away her female qualities and instead "fill [her] from the crown to the toe, top-full / Of direst cruelty," a quality

conventionally associated with a man (I.v.42). That she achieves such change of essence can be gleaned from the firmness of her mind in carrying out the bloody undertaking unbecoming for a woman and Macbeth's urge that she should "[b]ring forth men-children only; / For [her] undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males," signifying that his wife, with her ability to breed "nothing but males," is every bit a male at this point (II.i.73-5). Therefore, after the spirits have "unsexed" her, Lady Macbeth becomes "trans" and her sex, like Desdemona's and her handkerchief as a transitional object, becomes mutable – or, to be more accurate, mutated – and even unknowable.

The transitioning of Lady Macbeth has to be connected with the Weird Sisters who also display the ambiguity of their sex. It is clear in Banquo's inability to pinpoint whether the Three Witches are female or male – "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (I.iii.45-7). Both the Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth, however, constitute a powerful presence, especially in their manipulation or assertion over a male figure. It is fair to say that the murder of Duncan would not have taken place, had it not been for Lady Macbeth, and also that none of the tragedy would have happened at all, had it not been for the Weird Sisters and their prophecies. Similar to Lady Macbeth who might have developed her "direst cruelty" through the alteration of her true nature, the witches's power derives from their control over the contortion of nature manifested, for instance, in the moving of Birnam Wood towards Dunsinane Hill. Such control and power can be considered fitting for the figures who themselves represent the contortion of the conventional perceptions of sex and gender, amidst the duality of "[s]o foul and fair a day" (I.iii.38), in a play that is itself rife with nature's unruliness, from a falcon that was "by a mousing owl hawked at and killed" to the horses, "[b]eauteous and swift, the minions of their race," who "eat each other" (II.iv.13, 15, 18). Furthermore, echoing Lady Macbeth's undermining of Macbeth's manhood and the duality of her sex, the Weird Sisters, with their cunning ruses such as that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth," has led Macbeth to acknowledge amidst the battlefield that they have "cowed [his] better part of man," tricking him "in a double sense" (IV.i.79-80, V.viii.18, 20). In fact, it can be argued that Lady Macbeth is herself a witch, although she is without a beard, which, according to Dennis Biggins, is a token of a witch in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods (p. 263). That Lady Macbeth is a witch will further affirms her status of a trans figure as witches are "out of nature" as they are, as can readily be detected, for example, in the appearance of the Weird Sisters themselves, "hermaphroditic," possessing "no normative sexual identity" (Kimbrough 179). In fact, demolishing normal sexuality is "one of a witch's most pronounced and commonly invoked powers."

In his essay "Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in Macbeth," Biggins shows how the three things mentioned in the title of his essay are intertwined in

the play. He also points out how the Weird Sisters, with their unique ambivalence of not being, like the traditional witches, altogether devil but residing in "a kind of twilight territory between human and supernatural evildoing," still display many of the standard characteristics of a witch as identified by the demonologists, one of which is the engaging in "sexual malpractices" (p. 256). The claim is supported through the focus placed on 1 Witch, who will be referred to hereafter as the First Witch, and her lines in I.iii which tell of a sailor's wife, later given the epithet of "the rump-fed ronyon," who refuses to share chestnuts with her (p. 6). Hence, the witch's revenge plan preceded by the voicing of her determination – "like a rat without a tail, I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do" – is to "drain [the sailor, or the husband,] dry as hay" so that he, "[w]eary sev'nights nine times nine," will "dwindle, peak, and pine" (p. 9-10, p. 18, p. 22-3). The interpretation put forth here is that the First Witch intends to drain all the semen out of the husband, copulating with him so continuously that "[s]leep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid" (p. 19-20), and that he, exhausted from around a year and a half of the copulation, ends up withering away (Biggins, 1975, p. 257, p. 262). The epithet "rump-fed ronyon," the former part of which likely points to full buttocks, and the latter part of which could suggest baggage and polecat – both carry unmistakable sexual connotations in Elizabethan-Jacobean English – signals the "sexual antagonism," the notion that the First Witch views the chestnut-hoarding wife as a "sexual object" she herself could replace (p. 256). Moreover, the verb in the thrice-iterated "I'll do" often aligns with to copulate in Shakespeare's language (p. 262). This whole interpretation dovetails with the old belief in witchcraft and demonology that witches and the demons, who could be either their masters or their servants, could be engaged sexually with one another or, due to their sexlessness, with "ordinary mortals of both sexes," therefore, as succubi, seeking semen from men and afterwards, as incubi, inseminating women (p. 257-8). That the First Witch will operate in the guise of "a rat without a tail" points to the demonologists' belief that animal shapes could be taken amidst the task of acting as an incubus or a succubus, and to the notion that there has to always be some defect that gives away the devil's transformation (p. 261).

It is further argued that Lady Macbeth also participates in sexual malpractices. Joining other critics such as D. F. Rauber, who views Lady Macbeth's questioning of her husband's manhood as "saturated with sexuality" and puts forth that her strategy relies mainly on "a kind of sexual blackmail" – "From this time / Such I account thy love" (I.vii.38-9) – Biggins concludes that Lady Macbeth's supplication for her husband to pursue the regicide is wrought with "sexual terms". Her husband's manhood, which she derisively calls into question, is equated with "both virility and valor." Resonating with the Porter's comment on the paradoxical effects of alcohol – "much drink may be said to be

an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off ... makes him stand to, and not stand to" (II.iii.30-34) – Lady Macbeth's scornful provocation to make her husband proceed – "Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since? / And wakes it now to look so green and pale, / At what it did so freely? From this time / Such I account thy love" (I.vii.35-9) – can be interpreted as juxtaposing a sexual intercourse with a murder (Biggins, 1975, p. 266-7). Apart from indicating the murder of Duncan, the what can also signifies an act of having sex while being inebriated, which, in Macbeth's case, is accompanied by the shame and regret afterwards. Macbeth's balking at the murderous undertaking is thus equal to "sexual nonperformance."

In line with the contemporary belief of a succubus and an incubus sexually taking advantage of and abusing their victim, Lady Macbeth's invitation to the "murdering ministers" to "[c]ome to [her] women's breats, / And take [her] milk for gall" (I.v.47-8) can be read as her wish for an occult sexual relationship, in which the demons, both "lovers and sucklings," supersede her milk with gall or claim it for the conversion elsewhere afterwards (p. 264). The product of this ungodly copulation is of course the murder of Duncan. Lady Macbeth's participation in unusual and perverted sexual activities dovetails with the stigma of sexual incontinence fallen upon the women in early modern England who dared to cross the sex-gender boundaries. Furthermore, that Lady Macbeth is giving suck to the demons, which, as has been pointed out, might very well be assuming another shape amidst the role of an incubus, coincides with the early modern consensus that witches, resembling lactating mothers, could be discerned by "the presence of an extra nipple or teat, which was used to nurse Satan's familiars" (Chamberlain, 2005, p. 81).

In addition, from a biological or medical perspective, Lady Macbeth's imploration to the sinister spirits to "unsex" her can be taken literally as first and foremost her wish to alter the somatic, and not the psychological, aspects of her femininity. In an essay titled "'A Strange Infirmity': Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea," La Belle puts forth the notion that Lady Macbeth in her soliloquy is actually trying to cease her menstruation. First of all, she pleads that "no compunctious visitings of nature" shake "her fell purpose" (I.v.45-6). Although the "visitings of nature" have commonly been defined as related to compassion, conscience or scruple, it can also bear a biological meaning (La Belle, 1980, p. 382). In his 1652 Vade Mecum: Or, A Companion For A Chyrurgion, Thomas Brugis talks of "the overmuch flowing of womens natuarall visits," defining "visits" as, in La Belle's words, "occurrences of menstruation" (qtd. in La Belle, 1980, p. 382). In addition, Lady Macbeth also asks the spirits to "[m]ake thick [her] blood, / Stop up th'access and passage to remorse" (I.v.43-4). This, again, is, according to La Belle, her wish for "the periodic flow to cease, the genital tract to be blocked" (p. 382). For one thing, the word "passage" is what medical

records in the Renaissance used to refer to "the tract through which the blood from the uterus is discharged." Also, John Sadler, in the 1636 The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse wherein Methodically are handled all uterine affects, or diseases arising from the wombe, discusses how during the cessation of menses the blood becomes "viscuous and grosse, condensing and binding up the passages, that it cannot flow forth" (qtd. in La Belle, 1980, p. 382). Moreover, he talks of how "the wombe communicates to the heart by the mediation of those Arteries which come from Aorta," thus making clear how Lady Macbeth's thick blood would not travel to "remorse," which should be seated in the heart. That the Elizabethans believed in the causal relationship between the mind and the body can explain how Lady Macbeth, through her significant change of the biological aspects of her femininity, would succeed in achieving the psychological characteristics of the other gender (La Belle, 1980, p. 382).

The stoppage of Lady Macbeth's menstruation is worth exploring in this paper as the Renaissance medical records also point out the belief that the growth of beard was a consequence of such cessation of menstruation. Nicholas Culpeper, in the 1676 A Directory for Midwives: Or, A Guide for Women, in their Conception, Bearing; And Suckling their Children, cites Aristotle as saying "that some Women have hairs in their chin, when their Courses [menses] stop" (qtd. in La Belle, 1980, p. 384). This finds resonance in Sadler's Sicke Womans Looking-Glasse, which discusses, after Hippocrates, a woman who had "a beard, with a countenance like a man" when "her termes [menses] were supprest." Such rather startling accounts are corroborated and explained in Hirsch's essay "'What Are These Faces?' Interpreting Bearded Women in Macbeth." According to "the accepted medical knowledge of the age," men and women have different means of eradicating their superfluties, that is, male bodies, being "hotter (and therefore more efficient)" and having "special pores," dispose their excess through "sweat and beards" while women do the task through menstruation (p. 98). This is the reason why Hirsh speculates that the audience members of Macbeth with their wide range of knowledge in medicine (it is noteworthy that next to the Globe Theater stood St. Thomas's Hospital) might have perceived the Weird Sisters as women who had stopped menstruating (p. 97, p. 99). As a result, the claim that Lady Macbeth is a witch is made stronger as her plea to the spirits to "make thick her blood" and "stop up th'access and passage to remorse" could make her, too, grow beard, the token of a witch, and fit to join the Weird Sisters.

Goneril in King Lear is like a lost twin sister of Lady Macbeth's. The British princess shares with the Scottish queen the conventionally masculine characteristics, which, by juxtaposition, shame their softer and wavering and thus more feminine husbands, and even the contamination with witchcraft, which should make her sex likewise questionable. Going hand in hand with

Macbeth's excess of "th'milk of human kindness" (I.v.17), Goneril proclaims that her husband possesses "milky gentleness and course," giving him the effeminating epithets of "mild husband" and "milk-livered man" (I.iv.328, IV.ii.1, 50). In Goneril's defense, it is of note that, having listened at the end of the play to the account of how hard Edgar's life has been, Albany does announce himself on the verge of releasing what Lear has termed "women's weapon," saying, "If there be more, more woeful, hold it in, / For I am almost ready to dissolve, / Hearing of this" (II.iv.273, V.iii.203-5). Moreover, echoing Lady Macbeth's accusing her husband of "[living] a coward" and "[l]etting 'I dare not', wait upon 'I would,'" Goneril also states that "[i]t is the cowish terror of [Albany's] spirit / That dares not undertake (IV.ii.12-3). Indeed, Albany is not the only male character who is rendered effeminate when encountered by Goneril. In II.iv where the reasonableness of Lear's soldiers is passionately discussed, Goneril, joined by Regan, stands for "masculine rationality" evinced by such sound questions as "What need you five-and-twenty? Ten? Or five? / To follow in a house where twice so many / Have a command to tend you?" (p. 257-9), in contrast to Lear's "feminine demand" deep rooted in irrationality and emotionality (Hoover, 1984, p. 61). Lady Macbeth's plea to the evil spirits to "unsex" her finds its resonance in Goneril's voicing the need to "change names at home and give the distaff / Into [her] husband's hands (p. 17-8). Goneril mocks Albany's manhood, saying, "Marry, your manhood, mew!," when he claims that he only refrains from tearing her to pieces because she is a woman – "Howe'er thou art a fiend, / A woman's shape doth shield thee" (p. 66-8). Also calling her "devil" and "changèd and self-covered thing" and proclaiming that "[p]roper deformity shows not in the fiend / So horrid as in a woman," Albany should evoke the notion that Goneril is akin to some demonic creature in the disguise of a woman, reminiscent of a succubus or an incubus who are fond of taking other shapes (p. 59-62). With consideration also to Lear's pronouncement, "Goneril with a white beard," it is clear that Shakespeare urges us to entertain the association of Goneril with a witch (IV.vi.97). Representing on the early modern theater stage like Lady Macbeth the women who transgress the rigid sex-gender boundaries, the stigma of sexual incontinence is overt in her affair with Edmund. Like cross-dressed women who, pretending to be a man, "encroached on the privileges of the advantaged sex" (Howard, 1988, p. 420), Goneril should arouse no wonder when she evinces the defiance in proclaiming to Albany towards the end, "the laws are mine, not thine" (V.iii.159).

Indeed, Lady Macbeth and Goneril also die similar deaths, both being subjected to offstage suicide, the unpardonable sin. The former, whose death is announced to Macbeth by the servant Seyton, the pronunciation of which, quite aptly, is close to "Satan," is reported by Malcolm to have "by self and violent hands / [taken] off her life" (V.ix.36-7), while the latter is referred to by Edmund as "[t]he one the other poisoned for [his] sake, / And after slew herself

(V.iii.112). For Lady Macbeth, she has to suffer a kind of insanity prior to her death, presumably being exceedingly ridden with guilt from murder after murder, thus the need to keep washing her hands and utter in her somnambulism things such as "Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?" and "The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? / What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (V.i.39-40, 42-3). Yet, this depiction of her abrupt guilt-ridden madness seems to contradict her characterization, the firmness of mind and purpose displayed throughout the play up to this point. In other words, it is curious how the forceful Lady Macbeth could end up suffering what she has cautioned Macbeth against or so fervently and scornfully criticized him for after the murder of Duncan – "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad" or "My hands are of your colour, but I shame / To wear a heart so white" (II.ii.34-5, 65-6). In short, what has happened to the mantra that "[t]things without all remedy / Should be without regard: what's done is done"? (III.ii.12-3)

Therefore, it is worth conjecturing what could be the reasons behind this act of stifling, on the playwright's part, the female characters such as Goneril and, especially, Lady Macbeth, or even Desdemona, who, though not ending her own life nor being maliciously defiant, is instead smothered by Othello, an act of literal stifling, being yielded only a few self-incriminating lines before her complete silent death. For an easy guess, it could simply be down to the execution of witches, which was widespread in Europe at the time. However, in Lady Macbeth's case, it can be related to her unscrupulousness towards infanticide uttered to provoke the hesitant Macbeth and assure her unflinching determination in murdering Duncan. Lady Macbeth claims she has breastfed a baby and knows how tender it is to love such a baby, and yet, had she sworn to do the same task as Macbeth's, she "would, while [the baby] was smiling in her face, / Have plucked the nipple from his boneless gums, / And dashed the brains out" (I.vii.56-8). According to Stephanie Chamberlain, the early modern England did harbor the anxiety or rather mixed feelings towards mothers, seeing them, on the one hand, as selfless and praiseworthy beings due to the devotion to their children, and, on the other hand, as a group to be concerned about, considering how they held large influence over the transmission of patrilineage, how they could destroy the lineage "through marital infidelity, nursing, and infanticide" (p. 73). That a caesarean section, what Macduff's mother must have been subjected to, would most likely have been performed only in the case of a legitimate child, and not a bastard, speaks to the early modern obsession with the preservation of the patrilineage, which, when a caesarean section was resorted to, also meant "a conquest over the maternal body," which would have been cut open in various places (p. 85). Early modern women who had killed their babies but managed to give "narratives of female weaknesses, ignorance, fallibility, and repentant virtue," as Marilyn Francus notes, would have been acquitted

(Chamberlain, 2005, p. 86). However, on the opposite, the fate destined to fall upon the insubordinate and cold-hearted mothers like Lady Macbeth was most often death by hanging (p. 86-7). The notion that Lady Macbeth is barren and cannot even produce milk, due to the stoppage of her menstrual blood, which was believed to be turned into milk after pregnancy and vital to a woman's conception, further helps to indicate how Lady Macbeth is inimical to the much valued perpetuation of patrilineage in more ways than one (La Belle, 1980, p. 383, p. 385). Viewed in the light of the anxiety of the society at that time towards the murdering mothers, Lady Macbeth's anti-climactic and muffled death, combined with her disappearance from the plot in roughly the latter half of the play, can therefore be deemed an apt treatment for a figure who not only herself bears an ability to commit infanticide but also literally embodies the discontinuation of the lineage by subjecting the king to "a fruitless crown" and "a barren sceptre" (III.i.60-1).

Nevertheless, one could argue that Lady Macbeth's mental illness and suicide might just be the biological consequences of her wish to "unsex" herself. According to Pierre Le Loyer, the author of the 1605 A Treatise of Specters or Straunge Sights, Visions and Apparitions, "idle fancies and fond concepts," "diverse imaginations of horrible spectres," and "fearfull sights" could "troubleth the braine" of a woman suffering from amenorrhea and compel the sufferer "to throwe and cast themselves into wells or pittes" or "destroy themselves by hanging, or some such miserable end" (Hirsch, 2008, p. 99). This tendency to take one's own life is corroborated by La Belle, whose essay, with regard to the medical consequences following the cessation of menstruation, relies on, again, Sadler's Sicke Womans Looking-Glasse and Robert Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy. It adds to the aforementioned symptoms the signs of what is akin to the modern-day clinal depression including an insomnia or a difficulty having a sound sleep, which coincides with Lady Macbeth's somnambulism; "melancholy passions," which manifest themselves in her fervor in trying to eradicate the "damed spot" (V.i.35) and giving voice to the thoughts ridden with the past murders and guilt incessantly; and the utter disinterest in living leading to suicide itself (p. 382-4).

Finally, the stifling of the trans figures in Shakespearean tragedies might as well be paralleled and explained by the early modern society's attempt to stifle the real-life manly women. Not only were the women who dressed themselves in male clothes regarded as the transgressors of the sex-gender hierarchy but also the perpetrators of the demolishing of the entire class system (Howard, 1988, p. 425). Epitomizing the early modern attitudes towards the mannish women, a polemical tract denouncing women's cross-dressing titled Hic Mulier in 1620, indeed, evokes the depictions of the tumbling down of England altogether, equating "the aspiration of women beyond their place" with the notion of white people being governed by black people or the English by the

Irish. The Hic Mulier reads, “If this [cross-dressing] bee not barbarous, make the rude Scithian, the untamed Moore, the naked Indian, or the wilde Irish, Lords and Rulers of well gouerned Cities” (Howard, 1988, p. 425). What the tract later calls for, unsurprisingly, is the male suppression of these unruly women, urging the “Fathers, Husbands, or Sustainers of these new Hermaphrodites” to stifle them and keep them in check, e.g. forbidding the purchase of the male clothing and making them learn the feminine virtues.

Therefore, that William Shakespeare, in a similar vein, could have been led to suppress his mannish female characters should not be beyond possibility. After all, Lady Macbeth, or even Goneril, would have proven even a greater worry and a bigger threat than the women who dared to walk the streets of London in male apparel, for in their breakdown of the sex-gender order and the whole social order, their transitioning from female to male, they require not one piece of male clothing nor any visible beard nor a sort of magic handkerchief. It is their constitution or their whole being that defies.

Works Cited

Biggins, D. (1975). Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in *Macbeth*. *Shakespeare Studies, 8,* 255-277.

Chamberlain, S. (2005). Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England. *College Literature, 32*(3), 72-91.

Graham, B. A. (2017, March 1). Transgender-Friendly Toilets Planned for 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. *TheGuardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com/sport/2017/mar/01/tokyo-2020-olympics-transgender-friendly-toilets

Guevara, P. (2016). Desdemona's Dildo: Fetish Objects and Transitional Sex in *Othello*. *Early Modern Culture, 11,* 27-41.

Hirsch, B. D. (2008). "What Are These Faces? Interpreting Bearded Women in *Macbeth*." *Renaissance Poetry and Drama in Context Essays for Christopher Wortham* (pp. 91-113). Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Hoover, C. (1984). Goneril and Reagan: 'So Horrid as in Woman. *San Jos Studies, 10*(3), 49-65.

Howard, J. E. Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England. *Shakespeare Quarterly, 39*(4), 418-40.

Kimbrough, R. (1983). Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender. *Shakespeare Studies, 16,* 175-190.

La Belle, J. (1980). A Strange Infirmity: Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea. *Shakespeare Quarterly, 31*(3), 381-6.

Mumford, G. (2017, May 8). Emma Watson Wins First Gender-Neutral Acting Prize at Revamped MTV Movie Awards. *TheGuardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com/film/2017/may/08/emma-watson-best-actor-mtv-movie-award-gender-neutral

Mumford, G. (2017, April 7). MTV Scraps Gender-Specific Categories for Movie & TV Awards. *TheGuardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com/film/2017/apr/07/mtv-scraps-gender-specific-categories-for-movie-tv-awards

Nunn, G. (2015, January 30). Is It Time We Agreed on a Gender-Neutral Singular Pronoun?" *TheGuardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2015/jan/30/is-it-time-we-agreed-on-a-gender-neutral-singular-pronoun

Ross, A. (2017, May 15). At Least 120 Schools Adopt Gender-Neutral Uniforms, Charity Says. *TheGuardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com/education/2017/may/15/120- schools-adopt-gender-neutral-uniforms-charity-says

Shakespeare, W. (2008). *Cymbeline*. R. Warren (Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Shakespeare, W. (2008). *King Lear* (1st ed.). G. Ioppolo (Ed.). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
Shakespeare, W. (2015). *Macbeth*. (3rd ed.). S. Clark & P. Mason (Eds.). London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.
Shakespeare, W. (2016). *Othello*. (3rd ed.). A. Thomson & E. A. J. Honigmann (Eds.). London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare.
Shakespeare, W. (2008). *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*. R. Warren & S. Wells (Eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Woolf, V. (1989). *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.