“Be bloody, bold and resolute”: Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in Macbeth

by Carolyn Asp

ALMOST without exception people feel constrained to play roles in accordance with what they believe to be the expectations of others. The individual suspects that he can only become a part of his society through performing roles which are defined by both negative and positive sanctions of law, custom, and accepted norms of behavior. A stereotype is an intensification of a role which typifies in an unvarying pattern a conception, opinion, or belief concerning appropriate modes of behavior. Stereotypes frequently narrow the expression of human personality and the range of authentic sexual identity by embodying a conventional and superficial view of the roles men and women are to play in social interaction and even in their perceptions of themselves. They not only make self-knowledge difficult; they impede authentic communication and create a society in which fixed ideas and modes of response are accepted and even admired. Because stereotypes focus on one aspect of the personality and disregard or denigrate others, they create models which, ironically, are almost impossible to embody because they fragment and narrow the personality rather than unify or express it.

The examination of sexual stereotyping is one of Shakespeare’s enduring interests, and is found in plays as diverse as Much Ado About Nothing and Antony and Cleopatra. In Macbeth the phenomenon of such stereotyping is highly developed and central to the tragic action. 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. The dichotomy between role and nature which ensues ends with her mental disintegra-


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tion and suicide. Macbeth’s case is more complicated. In the play the male stereotype is associated with violence made socially and ethically acceptable through the ritual of warfare. Under the urging of his wife, Macbeth not only accepts the narrow definition of manhood that the stereotype imposes but he agrees to act that role for self-aggrandizement. Unlike his wife’s role-assumption, Macbeth’s is not in conflict with his nature; rather, it is an expression of a certain aspect of it. It tempts him to exercise godlike power through the violence it calls courage and aspire to freedom from consequences and invulnerability from mortal danger. But because it releases anarchic forces within him and allows him to give full play to his intense egoism, it seals his doom both psychologically and socially.

When the play opens, Macbeth is presented as the most complete representative of a society which values and honors a manliness and soldiership that maintain the cohesiveness of the tribe by extreme violence, if necessary. Even before he appears on stage he is admiringly described as the quintessential warrior, the upholder of tribal unity in the face of rebellion. The account of his battle with Macdonwald is meant to portray him as a man of fearless courage whose valor is the very symbol of his manhood, yet the description of the traitor’s disembowelment emphasizes cruelty and violence rather than courage. In the eyes of his peers and his sovereign, however, he is the “brave” and “noble” Macbeth. In such a world, as Edmund says in King Lear, “to be tender minded! Does not become a sword” (V.iii.31–2). Ironically, it is the “gracious” Duncan who is the only man in the play who could be called “tender minded.” Thanking his generals, he exclaims, “My plenteous joys wanton in fullness, seek to hide themselves/In drops of sorrow” (I.iv.35–5).

Duncan’s sentimental joy over the bloody victory emphasizes the fundamental weakness of a warrior society that condones and rewards in its heroes a violence that, unregulated by ritual or power, can turn against it. The conviction that valor is the whole of virtue (virtus) can displace the values of peace with those of war and cause the metamorphosis of the human into inhuman being.

1 Marvin Rosenberg in The Masks of Macbeth (Berkeley, 1978) discusses various interpretations of the character which have emphasized either the defeminized “terrible woman” aspect of the character or the sexually attractive, cunning, “loving wife” side (pp. 160–95).

2 Shakespeare, Macbeth, ed. Kenneth Muir (London, 1970). All further references to the play will be made to this edition and cited in the text.
Among the warriors expressions of tenderness are considered either degrading or counter-productive. When Rosse is moved to tears by Lady Macduff’s complaints, he says, “I am so much the fool, should I stay longer, / It would be my disgrace, and your discomfort” (IV.ii.28–9). Anguished by the news of his family’s massacre, Macduff tries to repress his tears, admitting that they make him “play the woman.” Urged by Malcolm to “dispute it like a man,” he at first rejects the stereotypical response and tells the prince, “I must also feel it like a man,” that is, like a complete human being who can integrate both feminine and masculine responses. It is significant that at this major turning point in the action Shakespeare emphasizes the full humanity of Macduff, the pre-ordained instrument of retribution. If only for a moment he transcends the stereotype. Then under the pressure of Malcolm he converts his “feminine” grief to manly revenge, crying out: “front to front,/Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself!/Within my sword’s length set him” (IV.iii.235–7). Only a fully human warrior can confront and conquer the “fiend” that Macbeth has become.

The manly stereotype in this play exceeds the limits of soldierly valor and embraces the extreme of retaliatory violence. This attitude permeates society from noble to bondsman. On one end of the scale Macduff’s cry “He has no children!” voices his frustration at being balked of complete vengeance. On the other end, the murderers whom Macbeth suborns to kill Banquo assert, “We are men, my liege” when Macbeth asks them if they will suffer Banquo’s “crimes.” Macbeth agrees that “in the catalogue ye go for men” (III.i.91), yet he makes a distinction between the catalogue of men and the “valu’d file”: there is no basis for identity as a man merely in declaring one’s male gender or membership in the human race. In Macbeth’s mind manhood is not a constant, fixed quality but one which must continually be proved by manly deeds. So he asks them to define themselves further: “Now if you have a station in the file/Not i’th’worst rank of manhood, say’t” (III.i.101–2). One declares that the vile buffets of the world have incensed him to recklessness; the other, weary with disasters, would set his life on any chance. Both men dare to take the course of their lives into their own hands and prove their manhood in violently self-assertive action. Under Macbeth’s questioning, a sophistical syllogism emerges from the conversation: the valued man is the courageous man; the courageous man will dare even murder to right the wrongs done to him; therefore, the valued
man is he who will dare to commit murder. By this reasoning, Macbeth justifies himself as well as his agents.

Although a definition of manhood in terms of qualities such as daring and ruthlessness is not totally invalid, it is incomplete, as Macbeth knows in his deepest being. Initially he rejects his wife's call to violence, emphasizing the limits that circumscribe human/humane action: "I dare do all that may become a man, /Who dares do more is none" (I.vii.46–7). He fears the inhuman, godlike power that overstepping the limits implies; he fears to lose his humanity in the exercise of "manly" deeds. Macbeth has an inchoate grasp of the idea that being human means accepting the limits imposed by social interconnectedness, by one's rank and role. He cherishes the "golden opinions" he has won from his peers by circumscribed action. Although he seems unsure of his own relationship to the concept of true manhood, he can recognize in Banquo a complete man whose "royalty of nature" and sexual potency he fears yet admires. Macbeth admits that Banquo, like himself, "dares much," yet

... to that dauntless temper of his mind,
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
To act in safety.

(III.i.49–51)

As Eugene Waith comments: "True manhood is a comprehensive ideal, growing out of the familiar Christian concept that man is between beasts and angels in the hierarchy of creation. To be worthy of this station, a man must show more than physical valor which characterizes the soldier and traditionally distinguishes the male of the species."

A major part of Macbeth's agony is created by his recognition of what constitutes full manhood and his conflicting acceptance of an incomplete stereotype. Why, knowing what he does, does he accept it? Because he succumbs to the temptation that faces every tragic hero set within a world of limits, the temptation to override those limits and establish himself as an omnipotent center of reference. The stereotype gives Macbeth a role whereby to act out a species of godlike power which manifests itself in the ability to take human life with

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impunity. The tragic irony of his situation, of which he gradually becomes aware, is that in the actualization of this “godlike” potential he becomes inhuman, less the man, in the full understanding of the word.

The text indicates that Macbeth is an effective killer on the battlefield, but as a representative figure, he is no more violent than any man could be, nor is he any more of a killer than the warriors who are his peers. What differentiates Macbeth from other males in the play is his intense awareness of the potential for violence within him and his willingness to entertain unrestricted fantasies as to how that potential might be used. Immediately after his first encounter with the Weird Sisters he asks himself:

... 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?

      (I.iii.134–7)

Later he bids the stars hide their fires lest his dark desires be exposed to even a glimmer of light. He is a man terrified yet fascinated by the power within him. This is why he initially seeks limits, calling upon the restraints that morality and society can impose upon him. When his wife describes him as “too full of the milk of human kindness,” she bases her interpretation of his character on those energies of restraint (fear, human respect, conscience) to which he conforms his outward behavior. Understanding his fascination with violence but not his terror of its effects, she forces him to ask himself whether or not he dares to risk acting out the potential that is in him in order to objectify the possibilities of his self. If he does not dare, will he ever know himself and his possibilities? The question he must ask himself is whether or not the consequences of purely self-defining action will destroy his humanity. Macbeth senses that once he enacts his deep desires he will be radically transformed. Inhuman energy will be generated from this commitment to self-realization uninhibited by responsibility. He, even more than his wife, realizes clearly that “what is done, is done! And cannot be undone.” Since the effort to be inhuman is essential to the service of Mars, the limited definition of manhood associated with soldierly valor is perfectly suited to Macbeth’s project of self-divinization.

In Macbeth’s Scotland, violence and its accompanying qualities are
limited to the male. Women are subordinate to men and divorced from political influence because they lack those qualities that would fit them for a warrior society. Rosse, describing Scotland’s dire state, says that the crisis is so unnatural it would “make our women fight” (IV.iii.187). This comment suggests that Shakespeare took liberties with his source in order to create an artistic world in which he could examine male and female stereotypes. Holinshed actually writes of this period that “in these daies also the women of our countries were of no lesse courage than the men; for all stout maidens and wives (if they were not with child) marched as well in the field as did the men, and so soone as the armie did set forward, they slue the first living creature that they found, in whose bloud they not onlie bathed their swords, but also tasted thereof with their mouthes.”

The stereotypical role of women in the play, however, defines them as weak, dependent, non-political, incapable of dealing with violence except to become its victims. After Duncan’s murder, when Lady Macbeth demands to know “what’s the business,” Macduff describes the typical feminine reaction to such news:

O gentle lady,
’Tis not for you to hear what I can speak:
The repetition in a woman’s ear,
Would murther as it fell.

(II.iii.84–6)

Macduff, like Hotspur, refuses to share his political life with his wife; instead, he leaves for England without a word to her. She resents his departure and interprets it as a deserted. Rosse, in a patronizing manner, counsels her to “school” herself, excusing Macduff’s behavior on the grounds that her husband is “noble, wise, judicious,” in political life and must, as a result, be a good husband and father. Even though Macduff and his wife seem to be the normative couple in the play, their communication with and understanding of each

6 D. W. Harding, “Women’s Fantasy of Manhood: A Shakespearean Theme,” SQ, XX (Summer, 1969), 249. Harding describes Lady Macduff’s attitude as “the woman’s feeling that although she is helpless in the world of action a man should be able to cope with anything.” The major complaint Lady Macduff voices, however, is her disappointment at being kept in ignorance. She construes her husband’s secrecy as lack of trust and love. In an earlier tragedy, Julius Caesar, Portia argues that she can only be a true and loyal wife to Brutus if she shares in the totality of his life, including his politics; otherwise she dwells but in the “suburbs” of his pleasure.
other fall far short of that exhibited between Macbeth and his wife early in the action. Until he is bowed by calamity, Macduff lacks the capability for sympathetic communion that Macbeth possesses: he fails to foresee his wife’s sorrow and anger and he seems unaware of the real danger to which he has exposed his family by his absence. The action of the play proves his wife’s complaints to be justified. Significantly, Macduff and Lady Macduff never appear on the stage together.

In his conversation with Malcolm, Macduff exhibits a condescending attitude toward women, whom he separates into saints and whores. When Malcolm claims to be an arch-voluptuary, Macduff cynically assures him:

We have willing dames enough; there cannot be
That vulture in you, to devour so many
As will to greatness dedicate themselves.

(IV.iii.72–4)

On the other hand, he approves of the fact that Malcolm’s mother was “oftener upon her knees than on her feet,/Died every day she liv’d” (IV.iii.110–13), a royal hermitess rather than an imperial jointress.

In a society in which femininity is divorced from strength and womanliness is equated with weakness, where the humane virtues are associated with womanliness, the strong woman finds herself hemmed in psychologically, forced to reject her own womanliness, to some extent, if she is to be true to her strength. Lady Macbeth is such a woman, worthy of the equality her husband bestows upon her early in their relationship when he calls her “my dearest partner of greatness.” Macbeth here shows himself remarkably free from the chauvinistic attitudes that dominate his society. It certainly seems his intent to share power with her and establish a kind of joint-rule that would fly in the face of custom. It is obvious that she is attracted by the prospect of wielding power in her own right, but there is no evidence to indicate that she wants royal status for herself alone. Convinced that she must work through her husband if they are both to attain greatness, she scrutinizes his weaknesses and determines to “chastise with the valour of [her] tongue/All that impedes [him] from the golden round” (I.v.29–30). Her valor throughout the play is, as she describes it here, primarily rhetorical. Her role, as she perceives it, is to evoke her husband’s “noble strength” so that he can act in
accord with his desires. To do this she must appeal as a woman to his manliness as well as channel her energies into maintaining a persona of masculine courage. As Rosenberg observes, masculine and feminine impulses are at war within her; she is unable either to fuse them or to polarize them.7

Lady Macbeth has so internalized the stereotypes of her society that she is convinced that she must divest herself of her femininity if she is to have any effect on the public life of her husband. She calls upon the “murdering ministers” to turn her maternal milk to vengeful gall, to “unsex” her so that she may become “the fierce and terrible instigator of murder.”8 Yet, in spite of her dire invocations, her conscious desire to take on a male psyche, her fundamental, even unconscious femininity breaks through the surface of her arguments with her husband before Duncan’s murder. In these arguments she wages a sexual assault which can only be successful if Macbeth perceives her as intensely female.9 When she describes him as a husband/lover who, like his hope of glory, has become “pale,” “green,” and “waning,” she challenges an essential element of his self-image, that of potent male, which is the foundation of all his other roles. To be the heroic warrior, to be king, he must first act the man with her. When this role is threatened by her scorn, when the symbol of his whole enterprise is found to be flaccid or unacceptable (“from this time,/Such I account thy love” I.vii.38–9), the collapse of what might be called the male ego is imminent. She implies that she will find him unacceptable if he is afraid “to be the same in [his] own act and valour/As [he is] in desire” (I.vii.40–1). Only if he dares to do the deed will he be a man, and so much more the man, in her esteem. The whole argument to murder is couched in sexual terms: she accuses him of arousing her expectations and then failing to follow through with action. What man would not try to disprove that accusation?

What potency is to the male, maternity is to the female. Lady Macbeth plays on both of these physical/psychological states that are fundamentally associated with the sexual stereotypes in the play. On the one hand, she taunts her husband to show his potency in per-

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7 The Masks of Macbeth, p. 159.
8 Rosenberg, p. 160.
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formance; on the other, she offers to negate her own maternal power as an example of her dedication. While her rhetoric of violence convinces her husband to move beyond the limit and take on the role of "manly" murderer, the images she uses refer directly to her physical femaleness: "I would . . ./Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums" (I.vii.56-7). Macbeth's admiring command ironically affirms the very maternal instinct she boasts of denying:

Bring forth men children only!  
For thy undaunted mettle should compose  
Nothing but males.  

(I.vii.73–5)

Finally, she assures him of invincibility. When he hesitates, entertaining the possibility of failure and discovery, she merely asks contemptuously: "We fail?" She affirms that daring and courage will overcome all obstacles, an idea later echoed by the prophecies: "Be bloody, bold and resolute" (IV.i.79).

In spite of her pragmatic and ruthless rhetoric, it is obvious that the gall in her breasts has not been sufficient to unsex Lady Macbeth. She admits that she has relied on wine to make her bold and give her fire, qualities normally associated with the masculine temperament. When Macbeth appears after the murder she calls him "my husband," the only time in the play she addresses him by that familiar title that emphasizes the sexual bond between them. It connotes a certain desired reliance on his strength, indicating that she is not as independent as the stress of her role demands. The staccato rhythm of her speech preceding and just after her husband's entrance betrays an anxiety that not even the wine can mitigate. It is only when she realizes that her husband is losing control that she resumes the dominant role she would much rather he played.

Ironically, her assumption of a masculine role does not create partnership; rather, it distances Lady Macbeth from her husband. As long as he retained elements of so-called feminine sensibility, he was susceptible to her appeal: there was a "weakness" in him that re-

10 From gall springs both a desire for revenge and the courage which inflames a man for action; it is frequently associated with the masculine sex because it is the source of the irascible instinct and the choleric humor, both traditionally ascribed to the male. Hamlet, for example, berates himself for lacking manly action: "for it cannot be/But I am pigeon-liver'd and lack gall/To make oppression bitter. . . ." (II.ii.576–8). For a more extended discussion of Renaissance physiology in relation to sexual characteristics, see Ruth Anderson, Elizabethan Psychology and Shakespeare's Plays (Iowa City, 1972).
sponded to her challenge. After he fully assumes the stereotype she urges upon him, there is nothing in him she can manipulate. Her dream of being partner to his greatness is doomed by the very means she has used to insure that greatness. By making him “manly” she has guaranteed that he will think of her as subordinate and unworthy of truly sharing power. Her action shares with his a peculiarly self-defeating thrust.

After Duncan’s murder Lady Macbeth begins to admit the breakdown of congruence between the role she is playing and the person she is; alone, she admits: “Nought’s had, all’s spent, /Where our desire’s got without content” (III.ii.4–5). A dawning realization of the self (her repressed dimension of womanliness) behind the mask is essential to her tragic identity. When Macbeth morosely enters she resumes the mask and acts the strong companion. Unmoved, her husband echoes her internal apprehensions:

Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy.

(III.ii.19–22)

Although united in the same embrace of misery, each is isolated in a separate world of suffering. “The affliction of these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly” (III.ii.18–19) drives the partners apart even in the marriage bed.

It is ironic that throughout this scene Macbeth addresses his wife in terms of intimacy and affection, calling her “love,” and “dearest chuck,” while at the same time, he deliberately deceives her about the murder of Banquo. It is evident that she is no longer in his confidence, for when she asks “what’s to be done?” he tells her “be ignorant of the knowledge . . . till thou applaud the deed” (III.ii.45). His refusal to answer her question parallels Macduff’s earlier reluctance to answer her when she inquired “What’s the business?” It can be argued that Macbeth deceives his wife to protect her from implication in Banquo’s murder, yet in spite of this overtly good motive, his attitude reveals a patronizing and stereotyped point of view. In their conversation it is almost as though Macbeth is testing his wife’s reactions. When he remarks in a seemingly casual way that “Banquo and

11 Rosenberg, p. 170.
his Fleance lives” her answer comes up to the mark: “But in them Nature’s copy’s not eterne” (III.ii.38). It is a subdued response, lacking her earlier vehemence and conviction. It cannot be that Macbeth wishes to protect her from the fact of the murder since he drops too many hints as to the nature of the deed. His tactic seems geared deliberately to impress upon her that it is he who has planned and initiated the action that will result in Banquo’s death, that he has internalized her “bloody instructions” so successfully that he no longer needs her. When he perceives that she “marvels” at his words, he lamely justifies his conduct by telling her “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill” (III.ii.55).

The last time we see Macbeth and his wife together is during the banquet scene as they attempt to preside over the festivities. As the scene opens Macbeth reiterates certain norms that guide human and humane conduct: “You know your degrees,” (III.iv.1) he tells his guests, emphasizing the structure of hierarchy and limit that governs responsible social interaction. The banquet itself is an archetypal human situation which involves feasting and communality: it symbolizes that “living with” or conviviality that is the keynote of humane behavior. Macbeth can only play at being a part of the human scene: “Ourself will mingle with society/And play the humble host” (III.iv.4–5 [italics mine]). Lady Macbeth significantly “keeps her state,” remaining apart from the group. When the inhuman world breaks in upon him in the form of Banquo’s ghost, his wife, oblivious to the phenomenon, berates him for not even acting “the man.” Her failure to see the ghost indicates that she has no real affinity with the realm of the inhuman. Macbeth, on the other hand, seems to have the power not only to communicate with this realm but actually to conjure it. The ghost appears only after Macbeth hypocritically wishes that Banquo were present. When Lady Macbeth asks him the old question “Are you a man?,” he affirms the stereotype: “Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that/Which might appall the Devil” (III.iv.58–9). It is obvious then that Macbeth does not fear the ghost itself but what the ghost signifies: the extent and limits of his own power. This encounter is a moment of truth in which Macbeth clearly sees his affinity with and power over the inhuman world; his ability to summon the ghost, even inadvertently, proves how far he has stepped beyond the limits of humanity. In this confrontation he hysterically resorts to violent physical prowess as his standard of courage: “What
man dare, I dare” (III.iv.98), he boasts. Like the old Macbeth, he longs to prove himself in single combat: “Be alive again./And dare me to the desert with thy sword” (III.iv.102–3); but Banquo represents a realm of existence with which Macbeth is engaged but which he cannot confront with a sword. At the same time that the ghost affirms Macbeth’s alienation from the human community it also manifests the limits that plague his ambition to act with impunity. The role of manliness may allow him to act with imagined godlike freedom but it cannot guarantee that the deed will be done when it is done. The ghost is a reminder that although Banquo may be dead, Macbeth cannot escape the consequences of that death. It thrusts the very conditions of his humanness into his face:

. . . the time has been
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again,
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools.

(III.iv.77–81)

As Macbeth had conjured up the apparition so he dismisses it, calling it an “unreal mockery,” asserting that “it being gone/I am a man again” (III.iv.107). For Macbeth, “being a man” has become synonymous with being invulnerable to conscience, fear, or compassion, in a word, with assuming to himself godlike qualities and powers. Throughout the banquet he is almost completely divorced from the human situation of which he is the center; he creates “most admirable disorder” by his obsessive engagement with the realm of the inhuman. The feast disintegrates, bonds of fellowship and rank are disregarded, and Lady Macbeth commands the guests, “Stand not upon the order of your going,/But go at once” (III.iv.118–19).

Just as Macbeth was oblivious to his guests during the banquet, so he is oblivious to his wife after it. Focused intensely inward, he plots in solitude his future schemes. The distance between husband and wife is accentuated by the formal “Sir” with which she addresses

12 Heilman, in the article previously cited, asserts that “modern man finds a remarkably complete Shakespearean prototype in Macbeth when he is terrified of Banquo’s ghost. What is in the forefront of Macbeth’s mind is the necessity of asserting his manly valor, or insisting that his confusion and terror do not make him less a man. ‘What man dares, I dare’ is his self-rehabilitating vaunt. . . . Bears, tigers, duels to the death are all better than ghosts and impalpable dangers, all substantial, faceable, reassuring man that he is man” (p. 37).
him. As in Act II, scene ii, the action concludes with Lady Macbeth's invitation to bed: "You lack the season of all natures, sleep" (III.iv.140), a subtle hint expressing her need for the intimacy of the boudoir. Macbeth, however, is preoccupied with his determination to seek out the Weird Sisters: "now I am bent to know,/By the worst means, the worst" (III.iv.133–4). Preternatural knowledge means control, domination; it is an intrusive, penetrating activity, a kind of masculine sexual equivalent. His wife's invitation to literal sexual consummation pales before the intensity of Macbeth's psychic need. The ravenous desire to control futurity, to reinforce his invincible image, drives him to move actively towards these representatives of the inhuman realm. By the end of this scene Macbeth has taken a significant step away from his own humanity: he is content that his actions be mechanical, unreflective, untouched by considerations of conscience. "Strange things I have in head," he boasts, "that will to hand,/Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd" (III.iv.138–9).

In the human realm knowledge of events is the male prerogative; in the preternatural realm, on the contrary, it belongs to the sexually ambiguous Weird Sisters. In a perverse way they suggest a debased image of the hermaphroditic figure, a figure to whom sexual stereotypes are simply not applicable. Can we say that the inhuman, as represented by these creatures, is also the sexually undifferentiated? They are mysterious and powerful not only because of their knowledge but also because of the spontaneity and unpredictability that freedom from stereotypes allows. They come and go as they please; they will not be interrogated or commanded. Macbeth tells his wife: "When I burn'd in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanish'd" (I.v.4–5).

When the Weird Sisters first encounter Macbeth they present him with a vision of his destiny that tempts him to create his own future through an action that can only be performed if he accepts a false stereotype of manliness: murder becomes the means he must use to create actively his destiny and he can only commit murder by linking the image of the murderer to that of the male. They show him what

13 Peter Ure in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (Liverpool, 1974) argues that Macbeth plays an alien role of murderer. His argument breaks down, however, after his discussion of the appearance of Banquo's ghost. He fails to account for "the new brutality and directness of Macbeth's resolution" and complains that "we are not shown the antecedents of the transformation" (pp. 58–9). He fails to see how "[Macbeth] can suddenly alter [his] character and devise a new, more brutal . . . approach to murder"
he could be. The question is: will he aggressively create himself or will he passively let events work their way? At first he resolves: "If chance will have me king, why, chance/May crown me without my stir" (I.v.143-4). Yet Macbeth has always shaped his life by will and action; he is by nature one who takes the significance of his existence into his own hands. Finally, he rejects passivity and takes control of his future. In his second encounter with the Weird Sisters he demands that the prophecies be presented by the "masters," presumably demons who assume the shapes of the apparitions. These prophecies enkindle in him the false certainty that he can eliminate limitations, restrictions, and ultimately the threat of his own mortality if only he intensifies the male stereotype: "Be bloody, bold and resolute"; "be lion-mettled and proud" (I.v.79;90). The promise of security is his greatest enemy because it blinds him to the truth of his contingent status as a human being. If no man of woman born shall harm Macbeth, then he has achieved a godlike invulnerability which allows him to act without restraint or fear: "the very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand" (IV.i.147–8). It is this very type of action, however, that dooms him to destruction under the sword of Macduff.

As Macbeth strives to emulate "marble-wholeness," his wife splits apart psychically under the pressure of his indifference and her remorse. Her agony of spirit and deep dividedness burst forth without her conscious awareness in the sleep-walking scene. On the one hand she exhibits fearless determination: "What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?" (V.i.36). She uses the plural "our" when she speaks of power, indicating that it had been her desire and intent to share, a fantasy she can only live out in nightmares. On the other hand, she exhibits a horror of the deeds and their consequences: "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (V.i.42). Significantly, in her sleep she relives the mastery over her husband she no longer has: "Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard?" (V.i.36). Her final words, however, are a pathetic expression of her need for comfort and union: "come, give me your hand... To bed, to bed, to bed" (V.i.68). As in the early scenes of the play, she both despises her husband's "weakness" and desires to lean on him for support.

(p. 59). These problems are resolved if we take the position, as this essay does, that Macbeth's role as murderer is not alien to him at all.
As Lady Macbeth collapses under the onslaught of an infected mind, Macbeth succumbs to the assaults of external foes. When Seyton brings his word that the queen is dead, his response is terse and ambiguous: "She should have died hereafter" (V.v.17). Significantly, Lady Macbeth's demise is announced by the wailing of her women. At the end of the play she is completely removed from the masculine world she so desperately wanted to enter and which so effectively has excluded her. A victim of her "thick-coming fancies," she, like her husband, loses touch with her humanity except within the ambience of a dream world.

In the battle scenes at the end of the play, Macbeth, who channeled all his energies into being a "man," is visually and linguistically surrounded by boys until his final encounter with Macduff, the man of no woman born. It seems as though the feminine principle, removed by the sequestration and suicide of Lady Macbeth, transfers itself to the persons of these young males whom Macbeth considers inferior to himself. He disparagingly refers to Malcolm as a "boy"; he bullies Seyton, calling him "lily-liver'd boy"; and when young Siward challenges him to combat, he can hardly condescend to battle such an adversary. Although Macbeth seems invincible on the battlefield, we must remember that his "valor" is being exercised upon males unequal to him in strength and experience. In terms of courage, and according to the laws of Macbeth's society, young Siward does prove himself a man by paying "a soldier's debt"; in his case, manliness does not confer invulnerability. It is, rather, a willingness to confront death and take the consequences:

He only liv'd but till he was a man;
The which no sooner had his prowess confirm'd,
In the unshrinking station where he fought,
But like a man he died.

(V.ix.6–9)

Siward achieves a form of manhood, but the structure of the play demonstrates the limitations of the definition set forth in the eulogy.

During the final action, the very humanity that Macbeth has tried

14 L. C. Knights in Some Shakespearean Themes (Stanford, 1959) is of the opinion that "the point of the line lies in its ambiguity. Macbeth is groping for meanings, trying to conceive a time when he might have met such a situation with something more than indifference . . ." p. 141.
Sexual Stereotyping in Macbeth

so hard to escape forces itself upon his consciousness. He feels acutely his alienation from human society:

... my way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have.
(V.iii.22–6)

A strange remorse afflicts him when he confronts Macduff:

Of all men else I have avoided thee:
But get thee back, my soul is too much charg'd
With blood of thine already.
(V.viii.2–4)

He sees with tragic clarity that in having striven to become more than a man he has become less than one: “bear-like I must fight the course” (V.vii.2). Deprived of preternatural assurance by Macduff’s revelation, Macbeth begins to “pull in resolution,” suddenly losing that false valor created by the illusion of his own immortality. He briefly falters, and in that faltering, an echo of his former martial courage is heard once more. It is as though Shakespeare forces us to remember Macbeth as the warrior-hero whose true valor is the emblem of his manhood.15 Threatened with humiliating captivity, Macbeth refuses to yield; like young Siward, he fights on, knowing he is doomed.

At the end of the play the action of the opening scenes finds remarkable parallels,16 indicating society’s continued acceptance of the values and stereotypes that paradoxically both threaten it and guarantee its continuation. The false claimant to the throne is destroyed by superior force, this time embodied in Macduff, who, ironically, performs the same task that had previously been Macbeth’s. He walks on stage with Macbeth’s severed head, a brutal gesture that recalls Macbeth’s own ruthless execution of Macdonwald. The same emphasis on repression of pain and tender feeling, the same equation of soldierly valor and manhood are reiterated in the discussion of young Siward’s death. Malcolm, a subdued, more Machiavellian ver-

15 Matthew Prosser takes much the same view of Macbeth’s final moments. See his The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies (Princeton, 1965), p. 90.
16 Howard Felperin comments that the final scene is an “eerily and unsettling repetition of an earlier scene in the play.” Shakespearean Representation (Princeton, 1977), p. 135.
sion of Duncan, distributes thanks and rewards using the same imagery of planting that his father before him had used, but unlike the former king’s, Malcolm’s thanks are brief and measured, his tears merely promised. The warm, golden blood of Duncan shows colder, less bright, in his son. The prince, in a performance convincing enough to have deceived Macduff, claimed that he could, had he the power, “pour the sweet milk of concord into Hell” (IV.iii.97). Now that he is king, there is no guarantee that he, like Macbeth, could not be seduced into actually carrying out that claim. Society has not changed; it has merely eliminated two extremists who pushed the stereotype of manliness beyond the limits it was established to serve.

The verdicts levelled against Macbeth and his wife by their society, “butcher,” and “fiend-like Queen” do partial justice, if that, to the richness of their characters or the universal dimensions of the seductions to which they are exposed and to which they succumb. The tension which raises them to the level of tragedy in the eyes of the audience is created by the conflict between the roles they think they must play to actualize the self and achieve their destiny and the limits imposed by both nature and society. On the one hand, there is the ancient temptation: “ye shall be as gods”; on the other, there is the profound awareness (especially on Macbeth’s part) of the inviolable limits which keep men human. As Macbeth accepts a false masculinity that simultaneously fosters the illusion of his godlike power and diminishes his total human development, he is alienated from the very society that inculcates the stereotype. Although Lady Macbeth strives to share in the male world by consciously renouncing her femininity, neither she nor we are allowed to forget that “little hand” that cannot, finally, wield the knife. As his “dearest partner” she was to have shared in the “golden round” and the “greatness promised”; instead, she shares only in the dehumanization and nothingness Macbeth faces as his end.

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