Macbeth's Wicked Women: Sexualized Evil in Geoffrey Wright's Macbeth

Geoffrey Wright's ambitious re-imagining of Macbeth transposes Shakespeare's 1606 Scottish play to the warring criminal underworld of contemporary Melbourne, Australia. One might expect a cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare produced and set in the twenty-first century to reflect a contemporary culture positively affected by an internalized feminist ideology; however, Wright's recent rendering of Macbeth would suggest otherwise. Many of Shakespeare's plays expose what Hillary Fogerty refers to as "a historic inability to comprehend the complexity of sex and gender" (2) in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England. Fogerty further highlights the perseverance of this phenomenon in advocating for a recognition of the problematic nature of present gender representations, which she sees as beset by "a continuity of ideology" (2); if an English Renaissance characterized by intense hostility toward women is exposed in many of Shakespeare's works, then Wright's current Macbeth offers a disturbing representation of a contemporary society no less inimical to women. In particular, Wright's film is part of an enduring discourse linking femininity, sexuality, and evil, which exposes our persistent anxieties surrounding the alleged dangerous sexual power of women.

Deborah Mulhall resolves that "Sam Worthington's Macbeth seems more a sulky uppie than a man torn between raw ambition and integrity" (67). The weakness in characterization that Mulhall perceives is evidenced in Wright's tendency to establish Macbeth as a man at the mercy of the female sexual predator, rather than foregrounding the protagonist's "raw ambition" and inner turmoil. Indeed, what is perhaps most distinctive about Wright's adaptation of Macbeth is the overt sexualization of the three witches. While Lady Macbeth is frequently portrayed in film adaptations as the alluring villain who exploits her sexuality to negotiate and maintain power, Wright's rendering of the witches as depraved, seductive schoolgirls is certainly novel, not to mention highly entertaining. It appears that this portrayal is the only element of the film that Mulhall finds favorable as she highlights the film's focus on the theme of "fair is foul and foul is fair" through the schoolgirls whose "delight[s] in violence and carnal desire are at odds with their angelic faces" (66). Mulhall's intimation of the titillation value of these demonic characters for viewers and her observation of their being simultaneously "fair" and "foul" are incisive; however, her contention that "as any teacher knows," adolescent girls in general can be distinguished by their "callous indifference and sadistic pleasure" (66) has a decidedly misogynistic flavor and serves to perpetuate the very ideologies under question in the present study. The tendency to equate personified evil
with a demonized and highly sexualized femininity has concerning implications in terms of ideological manifestations of the female character in general. In attributing women with a conscious, recusant sexuality that tempts men toward chaos and calamity, Wright’s *Macbeth* perpetuates what Val Plumwood refers to as the “culture of the master” (187), the ideology that legitimizes all forms of oppression. Woman becomes a dangerous and unruly force that must be regulated, suppressed, and “mastered” to allow for the flourishing of a righteous patriarchal order. Considering the so-called “post-feminist” epoch currently inhabited by Western society, where the authority of feminist discourse has been significantly diminished, the ubiquity of such representations is alarming and reveals the poignancy of a contemporary struggle to understand and subvert persistent cultural practices and beliefs that continue to sanction the domination, exploitation, and oppression of women more generally.

Evidently, many of these contemporary cultural practices and beliefs bear a striking resemblance to those that informed the patriarchal ethos of many European countries during the Renaissance. Margaret Denike’s comprehensive study of the genealogy of “evil” focuses on what is popularly known as the witch hunts, those “deeply misogynistic campaigns,” which she believes “relied on the demonization of female sexuality, and which [...] aimed to bring a brutal, punitive and regulatory machinery to bear directly on women” (12). Denike’s examination of official church and crown documents from this time reveals that “one of the primary preoccupations of the officials of this age was the wickedness of the weaker sex” (12). Paradoxically, this “weaker” sex, widely thought to be prone to melancholy, madness, and hysteria, was also allegedly capable of actively defying nature and initiating wanton destruction. Either way these campaigns ruthlessly reminded women of the dire consequences of transgressing the bounds of “appropriate” femininity. As Denike would have it, the proliferation of the image of the powerful, libidinous, and potentially destructive woman in contemporary texts represents “a remarkable example of how the concept of ‘evil’ has been deployed in Western cultures, how it sustains the systemic degradation and devaluation of women, and how it facilitates the will-to-power of patriarchal hegemonies” (13). That such discourses still hold a contemporary resonance is not only evidenced in Wright’s text; when it comes to establishing Woman as a sexually insatiable and predatory creature, it would appear that Wright is in good company, not only in the form of other Shakespearean screen adaptations, but in the wider Western media generally. Courtney Lehmann’s compelling critique of a selection of modern Shakespeare film adaptations and spinoffs seeks to expose what she considers to be “anti-feminist appropriations” of Shakespeare’s works such as Michael Hoffman’s *William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1999) and John Madden’s *Shakespeare In Love* (1998) (260). Although Lehmann’s ruminations refer specifically to film adaptations made prior to the most recent production of *Macbeth*, their significance to this film is indubitable:

[...] the kaleidoscopic view of female subjectivity purveyed by these films is eclipsed by their more powerful fetishization of sex—the power to deny or to enjoy it—as the heroine’s only legitimate means of career advancement. Thus,
while seeming to offer an array of politically-enabling identifications for the spectator, these films reduce their female characters to so many layers of easily removed clothing. (260)

Wright's blatant contrasting of the sexual behaviors of Lady Macbeth and the three schoolgirl witches exposes a fascination with this alleged female "power" to either withhold sex or bestow it willingly as a means of manipulation. While Lady Macbeth denies her husband physical intimacy, the witches' sexual availability is unequivocal and they are unrelenting in their aggressive provocation of the unwitting Macbeth. Interestingly, the scene in which the witches' (and Macbeth's) libidinous appetites are finally satiated ensures the continuation of Macbeth's ill-fated trajectory; his ultimate downfall is assured. That this satiation is manifested in the form of a dance-floor orgy could perhaps demonstrate what Lehmann would call a tendency in post-feminism or "pop-feminism" to "collapse the politics of outrage into a preference for the outrageous" (261).

Viewers are first introduced to these "outrageous" witches in the opening graveyard scene where a "devilish" alignment is suggested in their defacing of tombstones and statues of angels with red spray paint. Wright juxtaposes the insidious merriment of the schoolgirl witches with Lady Macbeth's raw grief; while his wife weeps over the grave of "Beloved Son of ..." (presumably her child), Macbeth scrutinizes the wayward vandals as they exit the cemetery. Various elements of the mise-en-scène in the film's opening serve to create a sense of foreboding and contribute to establishing the schoolgirl trio as a formidable and potentially threatening supernatural force that derives its power from a consciously virulent sexual agency. While the witches' school uniforms, backpacks, and energetic skipping through the tombstones certainly denote their adolescent status, viewers are left in no doubt that these girls are far from innocent. Their willful desecration is performed with a hint of glee and their heavily lined eyes, red hair, and alabaster skin stand out against an otherwise monochromatic color design dominated by bleak grey tones. Wright's distinctly feminine representation of Shakespeare's arguably androgynous original evil trio involves youthful, self-assured, hissing witches in short skirts who are persistently surrounded by an eerie fog. Their ominous presence is enhanced via various sound effects including rolling thunder, incoherent whispers, and a piercing, insistent score, complete with a high-pitched synthesizer that is reminiscent of a distressed human scream. At this point, viewers are yet to witness the sheer voracity and perversion of the witches' sexual agency that will begin to manifest itself in the temptation of Macbeth at an empty nightclub, aptly named The Cawdor.

It is at The Cawdor that the propensity for the witches to disrupt the patriarchal order via their insatiable carnal desire is truly made clear. The witches' augur that Macbeth "shalt be king hereafter"; a prophecy rendered all the more mesmerizing and potent as a result of their impetuous sexual insistence. The seduction
of Macbeth at the hands of the fawning witches is accompanied by a slow and sensual, base-dominant score. Wright's use of the tracking shot enables a revolving perspective of the intimate scene that sees the witches and Macbeth caressing, clasping hands, touching foreheads, and gazing intently at one another as they are surrounded by swirling fog (disco smoke-machine) and are drenched in the deep, red and purple hues of the fill light that is partially enacted by a red disco ball.

The tracking shot is accompanied by intermittently blurred film, dutch tilts, and frequent dissolves that create a sense of unease in the viewer who is compelled to sense that they are witnessing an "unnatural," forbidden phenomenon; surely Macbeth's temptation and ultimate sexual submission to the schoolgirls' wiles will bode ill. These techniques also suggest Macbeth's drug and alcohol induced frame of mind and viewers may entertain the possibility that the witches are merely figments of his hallucinations, extensions of a psyche deeply disturbed by an irrepressible desire to gain ultimate power at any cost. Whether real or imagined, evil manifests itself in the form of the sexualized feminine, a force which, as Elise Marks notes, represents a "diabolic subversion of established authority" as it tempts and ultimately undermines "male bodies, male reason, and masculine institutions" (1). The witches' playful screams and giggles create a pretense of feminine submission, enhancing the theme of "foul is fair and fair is foul" and reinforcing the threat of an unchecked female sexual agency that is fickle and manipulative by nature. Despite this pretense, it is the witches' sexual ferocity that principally betrays their malevolent and potentially destructive power.

Wright's film sees this inappropriate and "unnatural" feminine sexuality as synonymous with a debased nature; a relationship manifesting itself most transparently in the animal-like hissing and crawling of the witches, not to mention their frequently naked bodies. During the sexual orgy scene, the naked witches engage in biting, scratching, and screeching, and one even goes so far as to leap on to Macbeth's back! Plumwood contends that domination and subjugation derive "conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial, and ethnic difference as close to the animal and the body—both construed as spheres of inferiority" (187). This inferiority is explained in the Western tendency to perceive animals as "mechanistic, non-thinking, [and] soulless," as outlined by Coviello and Borgerson (n.d. 3). Evidently, the often contrived connection made between the witches and animals in Wright's film and the concomitant inference that they require taming and containment, further serves to legitimize the violent sanctioning of "dangerous" women. The witches' connection to a debased nature is also clearly exhibited in the ingredients they include in their caldron, many of which, as Mary Ellen Lamb contends, represent a gruesome "blurring of human and animal" (536) in the original play. The recipe for the witches' steamy broth includes "liver of blaspheming Jew, gall of goat [...] nose of Turke, and Tartars lips, finger of birth-strangled babe, ditch-delivered by a drab" all cooled with "a baboon's blood." The ingredient of "sow's blood that
hath eaten her nine farrow” from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is inexplicably absent in Wright's film. In his extensive examination of “Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in [Shakespeare’s] *Macbeth,*” Dennis Biggins offers further elaboration on Lamb’s observations regarding the debased female sexuality suggested by many of these ingredients:

The liver was regarded as the seat of sexual passion; the Jew is perhaps mentioned not only because he was unchristened, like the Turk, Tartar, and birth-strangled babe, and so useful to witches, but also because of the Jews’ reputation, in anti-Semitic tradition, for obscene rites with (and the murder of) Christian children. The goat, like the baboon, was believed to be a particularly lustful animal. Turks and Tartars were celebrated exponents of inordinate lustfulness and heartless cruelty. The drab exemplifies degraded sexuality; both she and the sow have killed their young [...] in a gross denial of natural affection. (271)

Wright’s film presents a gratuitous visual representation of these ingredients that sees the witches sensually stroking various components of the gruesome, moist display while reciting their evil incantations. Furthermore, the cauldron’s ingredients create a narrative connection to Macbeth’s other “wicked woman,” Lady Macbeth, whose shocking claim that she would “dash the brains out” of her hypothetical baby is reminiscent of the witches’ disturbing requirement of the death of a newborn infant for their wicked broth. Lamb argues that the narratives of Lady Macbeth and the witches “share a form of dangerous authorship permeated by female functions” (537). While Lamb focuses on the maternal or nursing functions of these female characters in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth,* the present investigation seeks to examine the perverse femininity suggested by the shared sexuality of these characters in Wright’s *Macbeth."

More recent Shakespearean criticism has begun to move away from reading Lady Macbeth as the pernicious force responsible for her husband’s evil doings, instead, focusing on the detrimental impact of a patrilineal system whose survival relies on the insistence of polarized and restrictive gender roles. Cristina Alfar, in particular, presents a compelling case for this argument in *Fantasies of Female Evil: The Dynamics of Gender and Power in Shakespearean Tragedy.* However, at the risk of subscribing to earlier and sometimes limiting criticisms, the current study suggests that Wright’s film unapologetically foregrounds its female characters’ malignity and therefore serves to create and ultimately punish female evil. Lady Macbeth’s potent and ill-intentioned sexual agency is indicated
in part by a distinctive costume design consisting of notably revealing garments that are predominantly red and black in color. Her hair and make-up clearly connect her to the witches with whom she shares long, flowing, dark locks, pale skin, blood-red fingernails, and shimmering lips. Indeed, there are many motifs in the film that serve to connect Lady Macbeth to the witches. For example, the initial scene involving Lady Macbeth unconscious in the bathtub concludes with a form cut rendered as a fog-filled shot to the following scene that sees her reclining in bed with her husband. This explicit connection to the witches enacted through the fog motif suggests a supernatural (or at least "unnatural") force impacting on Macbeth's resigned acquiescence to his wife when he later concedes to heed the witches' prophecy and take violent action against Duncan. After hearing of Duncan's imminent arrival, Lady Macbeth's intimation that Duncan should be slain that evening while asleep: "never shall sun that morrow see," is followed by shots indicating preparation for his reception. The maid noisily slices a large cob of meat that bears a striking similarity to the vile ingredients later included in the witches' cauldron; she can also be seen lighting multi-tiered candelabras that distinctly resemble those lining the walls as Macbeth's relationship with the witches is consummated. These shots are accompanied by deep, purring thunder, reminiscent of the foreboding sounds attendant in Macbeth's initial sighting of the witches in the cemetery. Victoria Hill's Lady Macbeth places particular emphasis on the line, "you will put this night's great business into my dispatch," clearly implicating her character as the mobilizing force behind her husband's misdeeds. The power imbalance between the spouses is effectively communicated via frequent cross-cutting between the two, as the delivery of Lady Macbeth's cogent injunction is juxtaposed with her husband's doubtful, searching expression. Interestingly, Macbeth's eventual capitulation is presented through a clear indication that Lady Macbeth is behaving against the "nature" of her sex:

Bring forth men-children only;
for thy undaunted mettle should compose
nothing but males.

Worthington's vacant expression and insistent shaking clearly connote his character's discomposure after committing the murderous act. His distinctly perturbed demeanor contrasts with Lady Macbeth's decidedly unmoved reaction, which, combined with her accusatory tone upon discovering Macbeth has neglected to leave the offending daggers at the scene of the crime, leaves viewers in no doubt as to who is essentially responsible for Duncan's brutal slaying. Upon her return to Duncan's quarters to "smear the sleeping grooms with blood" in an attempt to "deem their guilt," viewers are provided a close-up shot of Lady Macbeth's face as she seizes a brief moment to observe the bloody scene; her unflinching conviction and blatant lack of remorse are palpable.

Despite the similarity in modus operandi between Lady Macbeth and the witches in terms of their seductive powers, Lady Macbeth exploits her ability to withhold sexual contact from Macbeth in an attempt to have him do her bidding. Early in the film, as Macbeth reclines in bed beside his wife informing her of the witches' prophecy, he caresses her thigh and attempts to procure a passionate kiss; Lady Macbeth's alluring red satin night-slip belies her distinctly cold and distant response.
Her apparent lifelessness and lack of animation at this point in the film serve to foreshadow her untimely death, which sees her placed on this same matrimonial bed later in the film. Despite her tendency to deny her husband sexual intimacy, Lady Macbeth exudes sexuality in Wright’s film. Her exploitation of this sexuality manifests not only in her denial of sexual contact, but also in her calculating attempt to evoke jealousy in her husband while dancing with the would-be victim of her malicious intent. On the eve of Duncan’s death, the Macbeth’s country mansion is implicated as a house of debauchery, a sexually charged environment, complete with slow, seductive music, frequent cross-cutting between couples engaging in intimate, suggestive dancing, a seemingly endless flow of red wine, and low-key lighting purported to stem from the prolific candles lining the walls. Lady Macbeth’s agenda in close-dancing with Duncan is made clear via her protracted, sultry eye-contact with her dance partner and frequent glances toward Macbeth as she attempts to gauge his reaction to her practical infidelity. Only when Macbeth fulfills his wife’s murderous wish and ignores his intuition to “proceed no further in this business” can he become the focus of Lady Macbeth’s attentions and finally be granted permission to “touch” her without fear of rejection. This “license” is evident at the celebration of Macbeth’s promotion where his newfound power allows him to engage in an authoritative and confident show of physical affection toward Lady Macbeth, placing his arm about her neck and tucking her hair behind her ears. Overall, it appears that a lack of affection, a desire for a physical, sexual response from his wife, spurs Macbeth on to violent action. Wright’s leading man clearly hints at the pivotal role Lady Macbeth plays in her “innocent” husband’s downfall in his suggestion that the film is actually a love story:

Yes it’s described as a tragedy—which it is, any man with a good soul going down is a tragedy. But essentially it’s got a nice spin on it because all he wants is love from his wife. (Production notes, in Mulhall 67)

It is Lady Macbeth’s denial of this love (indicated in the film by her deliberate avoidance of physical intimacy with her husband) that is the key to her malevolent power; while she remains ever sensual and suggestive yet cold and unresponsive, Macbeth’s pining for requited affection and sexual consummation will assure the continuation of his wife’s hold over him. It would seem, however, that Wright’s Lady Macbeth neglected to consider that her husband might venture elsewhere; the satiation of Macbeth’s sexual desires at the hands of the witches ensures that Lady Macbeth’s position as his “dearest partner in greatness” is diminished and her descent into madness and eventual suicide ensues.

Lady Macbeth’s punishment for her transgression of “appropriate” femininity signals the downfall of a powerful and inherently evil female sexuality. The punitive measures asserted over this character in Wright’s film via her undignified insanity and ultimate destruction also herald the reinstatement of an apparently virtuous patriarchal and patrilineal order.
The representation of Lady Macbeth's antic disposition in Wright's film clearly connects her to the animal-like nature of the witches. As the doctor and waiting gentlewoman attempt to subdue her in her bedroom chamber, Lady Macbeth can be found almost naked (aside from skimpy leopard-print panties), screaming, panting, and writhing uncontrollably. The medical treatment applied to her unruly condition comes in the form of a tranquilizer jabbed into her arm, a procedure that seems more befitting of a wild beast. Lady Macbeth's behavior in this scene is also reminiscent of a woman in the later stages of labor; a link is suggested between her childless state and her derangement, which of course has its roots in a perverted nature further incensed by a sexualized and therefore debased maternity. Macbeth's entrance sees him distinctly unperturbed by his wife's forced submission; his insusceptibility is clearly communicated via his "cool" sunglasses, glass of scotch, and drunken, cocky swagger. Furthermore, he seems to actually revel in the unrestricted access to his wife's body granted by the tranquilizer. Paradoxically, while Macbeth talks of sorrow in his wife's heart, he ravishes her left breast as she lies limp and defenseless. Viewers might assume that Lady Macbeth's actual death was perhaps more dignified than her lunacy; however, Wright's sexualized staging of her dead body is particularly conspicuous. The bathtub in which Lady Macbeth has taken her own life by slitting her wrists is filled with blood-red water and surrounded by lit candles. Her naked corpse is positioned so that her hip and one breast (erect nipple and all) are prominently exposed. In its explicit portrayal of Lady Macbeth's death, Wright's adaptation of Macbeth subscribes to what Susan Blaha critiques as the tendency in Shakespearean texts (namely Othello and Romeo and Juliet) to depict "an aestheticised female corpse as the ultimate signifier of a woman's sexual desire" (1). In our case, Lady Macbeth's "beautiful" death not only brings her atonement, but sees her finally engaging in an "appropriate" feminine sexuality: one that is overwhelmingly passive. Perhaps the fact that the red in Lady Macbeth's lips has transferred to her cheeks indicates that she has finally achieved a state of innocence, a catharsis only permissible through death.

Despite frequent claims that various contemporary Shakespeare adaptations and spinoffs offer powerful remonstrations of Renaissance gender decorum, Wright's Macbeth perpetuates the very anxieties surrounding femininity and sexuality that made the witch-hunts possible. Like the inquisitors and judges of the fifteenth- to the seventeenth-centuries to whom Denike's study refers, Wright's film condemns the "evil" woman and provides "the reason she was such an ominous threat; the reason she was to be 'put to the question'; the reason she must die" (11). The cinematography in Macbeth constitutes a voyeuristic mechanism through which the fetishistic curiosity of the audience is satisfied; furthermore, viewers are compelled to participate in the surveillance of the film's "unruly" female characters. Lady Macbeth and the witches are observed through a distinctly Lacanian "male gaze," a term popularized by Laura Mulvey (1989) whose work exposed the tendency in visual texts to objectify women and to obsess over their alleged threatening sexuality. Wright's Macbeth certainly sets out to expose and ultimately punish an evil, sexualized femininity whose very existence threatens to undermine a righteous, yet easily tempted, masculine identity. Interestingly, whether lacking in gumption or filled with malevolence, neither gender escapes criticism entirely;
Wright's film not only highlights a fascination with a nocuous femininity, but also an anxiety over a weak, irresolute masculinity. If the ambiguous gender status of Shakespeare's original "bearded" witches represented a subversion of established boundaries that contributed to anxieties over a perceived threat to masculinity, then the combination of youthful beauty, distinct femininity, and a bestial sexuality in Wright's witches (and in Lady Macbeth) represents a slightly different kind of transgression but one that similarly flouts the conventions of "appropriate" femininity. Notably, Wright's rendition of the witches relies heavily on referential meaning as viewers are expected to recognize the often pornographic image of the "sexy schoolgirl"; a reliance that demonstrates the pervasiveness of such images in contemporary Western visual culture and one worthy of further consideration outside of the present inquiry. Perhaps one might assume that Wright's film, like many of Shakespeare's plays performed during the Renaissance, explores the titillation of the forbidden, the tempting nature of taboo, a sentiment found in Lisa Schwarzbaum's contention that Wright's representation of the witches as "naughty rave teens" is purely "for kinks" (49). Regardless of rationale, the most recent rendering of Macbeth undoubtedly reinforces the imperative for a continuing struggle to understand and subvert the enduring patterns of thinking that serve to condone and sustain oppressive ideologies.

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Works Cited


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